



GAYLA TWIST

*Fate of the Vampire*

The Vanderlind Castle Series: Book 3

# Fate of the Vampire

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# DEDICATION

To my darling Q.

## Prologue

My hair is a curly tornado, and it's always a challenge to see if I can subdue it without causing myself injury. I was upstairs in the bathroom giving it a triumphant final spray when I heard the doorbell chime. "I'll get it!" I shouted, sprinting for the stairs like a madwoman.

My mom stepped into the hallway as I raced past, and she barely had time to get out of the way to avoid me barreling into her. "Slow down," she called after me in her best motherly tone. "You don't want to be too eager."

I was always eager to see Jessie—like, rip the door off the hinges eager to see him—but what I really wanted to do was answer the door before my mom did. In fact, I needed to be the one to answer the door so that I could invite the gorgeous and enigmatic Jessie Vanderlind into our home. His coming over was a huge step forward in our relationship.

The lock on the front door gave me a bit of trouble. I'd opened the door a hundred thousand times in my life, but my fingers were having trouble obeying me. It didn't help that I knew Jessie was standing on the other side of the door and as soon as I managed to claw through it, I would be in his arms.

Finally, I was able to wrench the door open. "Jessie," I gasped.

There he stood—tall, chiseled, pale as moonlight, with full lips and dark, ruffled hair—a fantasy come to life and waiting patiently on my front step. He ran his fingers through his hair a couple of times and then looked at me with his gorgeous gray eyes. "Good evening, Miss Keys," he said, one arm tucked behind his back. I had the sneaking suspicion he was concealing a bouquet of flowers.

“Good evening, Mr. Vanderlind,” I said, mimicking his formal style but feeling like I had taken a light blow to the belly. Just seeing him had knocked the wind out of me. I pushed the front door open a little wider. “Won’t you please ...”

“Aurora, wait,” he said, cutting me off with a sudden urgency. “I know we agreed to this, but I really need you to think about what you’re about to do.”

“I have thought about it,” I informed him. We’d had this conversation before, multiple times.

“Please, just listen to me this one last time before we do this,” he insisted, reaching across the threshold and taking my hand. A jolt of electric tingles raced up my arm. That always happened when he touched me. “Some people get a pit bull as a pet. And they love their dog and roughhouse with it and trust it around their children,” he began. “But still, it’s an animal. A dangerous animal. It’s unpredictable.” I drew breath to interrupt, but he kept going. “Then one day, something gets tweaked in the dog’s brain, and it tries to rip the face off the neighbor who just happens to be out in his front yard planting spring tulips.” I tried again to say something to stop him, but he raised a hand to silence me. “And when the cops interview the distraught pet owners, they always say the same thing. They always say, ‘He’s such a good dog. We never thought he would ever hurt anyone.’ And they love their dog. They really love it. But that doesn’t mitigate the fact that the neighbor is in the intensive care unit. That doesn’t stop the creature they love from actually being a killer.”

“That has nothing to do with you and me,” I informed him rather stubbornly. He could use any crazy example he wanted, but I wasn’t going to change my mind.

“It has everything to do with you and me,” Jessie said, his expression very grave as he struggled to make his point. “When you invite someone like me into your home, you’re taking a risk. No matter how much I love you and no matter how much you love me, you’re still taking a risk that someday something will snap inside my head and I’ll end up killing you.”

I should have listened. I should have forced myself to hear all of the words coming out of his perfect lips, but instead, I only heard him say, “I love you.”

That was enough for me. I wasn’t going to listen to anything else. I pushed the front door open even wider and said in a clear voice, “Jessie Vanderlind, won’t you please come in.”

With a defeated sigh, Jessie stepped over the threshold. Despite myself and all of my convictions, a wave of dread washed over me. I had, after all, just invited a vampire into our home.

## Chapter 1

“Hello. I’m Helen Keys, Aurora’s mom,” a bright voice said behind me.

Once Jessie had stepped over the threshold and into our home, I wrapped my arms around his neck, eager to kiss him and practically scaling him in my attempt to do so. But he kept his posture ramrod straight, his arm clenched behind his back, and gave no indication that he had any inclination toward kissing me at all. That’s when I realized my mother was in the room. I’d been so busy battling the lock on the door and persuading Jessie to enter our home that I hadn’t heard her come down the stairs.

“Mom.” I blushed, immediately releasing him. “This is Jessie Vanderlind. Jessie, this is my mom.”

Jessie stepped forward, extending his hand. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Mrs. Keys.”

“It’s nice to meet you, Jessie,” Mom said, shaking his hand. “Aurora has a lot of great things to say about you.” I felt myself blush. Mom continued. “But let’s just stick with Ms. Keys for right now.” My mother was in that awkward position of having divorced my father a decade earlier but kept his last name because I was only seven at the time and she didn’t want to traumatize me any more than I had already been traumatized. But still, who wanted to walk around for the rest of her life labeled as Mrs. Whoever when she wasn’t even married to the guy anymore? Especially because my dad was a cheating snake who always complained bitterly about having to pay child support.



“Thank you for having me into your home, Ms. Keys,” Jessie said, pulling his arm forward from behind his back and presenting her with a large bouquet of purple flowers that had sunny little yellow faces.

“Asters,” my mom said, smiling as she accepted his offering. “How sweet.” Then, looking up at Jessie and giving him an amused smile, she said, “Well, aren’t you the charmer. I never expected a date of Aurora’s to bring me flowers.” I have to admit, I felt a brief sting; I had thought the flowers were for me. But my flash of jealousy didn’t last long because I could see that my mom was pleased. She turned to head toward the kitchen. “I’ll just put these in water. Can I offer you anything to drink, Jessie?”

“I’ll have the same as the flowers are having,” he told her.

“Aurora, why don’t you get your guest a glass while I deal with these stems,” Mom said. I knew that was code for, “Come in the kitchen for a moment.”

“I’ll be right back,” I told him, squeezing his arm. An evening frost still clung to him, and I knew that he had flown over. “You can hang your coat on the hook if you want.” We had a coat rack by the door that we really only used for visitors.

When I walked into the kitchen, Mom had Jessie’s water already waiting. “I can see why you were so excited,” she said in a whisper, handing me the glass. “I didn’t know they made seventeen-year-old boys that good looking. He could be a model.”

Dinner went surprisingly well. Jessie did a remarkable job faking his way through eating a meal, going so far as to rave over my mom’s pot roast, even though it was a little dry. “So, Jessie, are you part of the Vanderlind family that lives in the big house on the river?” Mom asked. I had already told her that he was, but I guessed it was her way of trying to make conversation.

“Yes, I’m the youngest in the family,” he replied truthfully, although he failed to mention that he was closer to Grandma Gibson’s age than he was to mine.

“Do you have any siblings?” Mom wanted to know.

“I have an older brother, Daniel, and some cousins that come to stay with us from time to time,” he told her. “But usually, it’s just Daniel, my mom, and me.”

“But you don’t go to Tiburon High?” Mom asked, piling more meat on Jessie’s plate under the assumption he was a growing boy.

“No, I’m home schooled.” That was the reply that Jessie and I had worked out. It would save a lot of questions about sports and after-school activities.

I’d been watching Jessie carefully. To all appearances, he was enjoying his meal, happily chewing away. But closer observation proved that he was just using his vampire speed to quickly remove the food from his mouth and conceal it in his napkin every time my mother glanced away. It was a pretty easy maneuver when he was eating the meat, but a little less graceful when it came to things like mashed potatoes. There were a few times when I had to stifle a giggle.

After we were done eating, Jessie insisted upon carrying his plate to the kitchen and even made his best offer to do the dishes. “You made this wonderful meal; the least I can do is wash up,” he told my mom, winning her over completely.

“No, you two go on and study. I’ll get the dishes,” she told him. When he tried to protest, she added, “I promise I’ll let you scrub a bunch of pans next time,” which made them both chuckle a little.

“Okay, great. Thanks, Mom,” I said, grabbing Jessie by the hand and heading for the stairs.

“Ah, ah, ah,” Mom said, stopping me in my tracks. “There’s no studying in your bedroom with a boy,” she reminded me. “You know that.” It had always been a rule, just not a rule I’d had any previous reason to try to cross. I’d only had one boyfriend, briefly, before Jessie, and he’d only been over to our house once or twice. “You two can use the living room,” she informed us.

It was literally impossible for me to concentrate on anything but Jessie when the two of us were in the same room. It was even challenging for me to think about anything but Jessie when he was not in the room with me. Fortunately, I had all my assigned school work done already; “homework” was just an excuse I told my mom because it sounded like what normal teenage couples do.

I took a seat on the couch, and Jessie took his seat, chastely, a full cushion-length away from me. I frowned, looked down at the cushion, looked up at my boyfriend, and blinked at him slowly. A smirk spread across Jessie’s full lips as he reached over and slid me across the couch so I was sitting snugly next to him. Vampires are surprisingly strong. I pressed against his muscular, lean chest and sighed. Being with him was intoxicating.

When my mom turned on the sink and we could hear her clinking the dishes together, Jessie bent down a little and kissed me on the lips. It was a soft, tender kiss, but I could feel the hunger underneath. It sent little sparks of pleasure shooting all over my body. “I know we should be studying, but I wanted to give you a proper hello,” he whispered, his breath tickling my neck and sending my libido through the roof.

The next thing I knew, I was on top of him, straddling him on the couch, kissing him madly and burying my fingers in his thick, dark hair. It wasn’t anything I’d planned or even thought through; I was just consumed with desire for him and never wanted him to stop touching me. “Aurora,” he whispered a bit hoarsely, and it was ecstasy to hear him say my name.

“Oh, Jessie,” I murmured back, lost in the touch, the taste, the smell of him.

Suddenly, I found myself at the other end of the couch with an open book in my lap. It happened so quickly that it made my head spin.

“Would either of you like some dessert?” Mom asked, poking her head in the living room. “We have ice cream.”

“No, thank you, Ms. Keys,” Jessie said, looking up from a book of his own. “I’m stuffed from dinner.” He patted his flat stomach to show how full it was.

“I’m good, Mom,” I added. “But thanks for asking.”

As soon as she disappeared, Jessie closed his book and set it on the coffee table. “I should go,” he said, starting to get to his feet.

“Why?” I practically whined, springing across the couch and grabbing his arm. “It’s still early.”

“I know, but I can’t keep my hands off of you,” he said, extracting himself from my grip. “And I don’t want to be impolite to your mother.”

“Then I’ll go upstairs and we can meet at our window,” I told him. We’d spent many secret evenings with Jessie sitting outside on the roof of our porch while I leaned out my bedroom window so we could talk without him receiving an invitation to enter our home. “This time, you can actually come in.”

Jessie smiled at me—a lovely, happy smile tinged with lust. Pulling me into his arms, he dipped me low, letting his lips skim over the flesh of my neck. “Aurora,” he whispered, breathing in deeply, taking in the scent of me. “I want to be with you so badly. More than you’ll ever know.”

“Then meet me at our window,” I said, wrapping my arms around his neck. I wasn’t normally so forward with boys. In fact, I usually didn’t chase after boys at all. I really didn’t mind being a virgin. Sex in high school was so complicated for girls. If you didn’t have sex, you got called frigid, and if you did have sex, you got called a slut. I had decided a long time ago that I wasn’t going to have sex with some random dude just to get it over with. I was going to wait for someone special, and that someone had his arms encircling my waist. Jessie and I had been through a lot together, and he’d saved my life on more than one occasion. Plus, the connection between us was electric; a simple caress from his hand was more thrilling than French kissing anyone else. So that was why I was so desperate to be with him. When I thought about having sex with Jessie, I was beyond ready. I did remember that one time Jessie had told me that he wanted to wait for marriage to be with me, but I was determined to erode his resolve. He had, after all, just said that he wanted me more than I could ever know.

“But,” Jessie added, pulling his lips away from mine. I hated that there was a “but.” Jessie righted me on my feet, still keeping his arms around me.

“This will be the first time for both of us.” He was so gorgeous, it was hard to believe he was a virgin, but he had no reason to lie to me. “I don’t want to rush into intimacy because we’re both feeling passionate. I think we should take it slow. I want to court you. I want to give you romance. I want to make our first time truly special.”

My first impulse was to tell him that just being with him made everything special. But he was right; it was his first time, too. If he thought we should go slow so he had time to court and romance me, then who was I to say no? As far as I could tell from my limited knowledge of the world, women craved romance and men were usually pretty damn reluctant to fork it over. Here I was, lucky enough to have a romantic boyfriend. The least I could do was appreciate my good fortune.

Finally, I spoke. “Okay,” I agreed. “I can wait if you can. But promise me,” I said, pressing my forehead against his, “promise me it won’t be too long.”

Jessie released a small laugh. “You’re such a modern girl. It really does take some getting used to.” I was about to feel hurt or embarrassed or something, but he quickly gave me a passionate kiss and added, “I promise.”

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“Aurora,” my mom said in a subdued voice.

I was having a wonderful dream where I was gathering colorful blooms in a lush, green field of wildflowers. My hair was loose around my shoulders, and I was wearing a favorite dress—green with tiny white flowers. There was a handsome boy by my side; the sunlight was dancing off his dark, wavy hair, and when he smiled at me, I could see happiness illuminating his usually stormy gray eyes. We were walking along hand in hand, plucking flowers as we went. I didn’t know where we were going, but I didn’t care. All I knew was I was very, very happy. And in a strange way, I felt at peace.

That’s why I did not want to relinquish the dream for school or work or whatever reason my mom was trying to wake me. None of those mundane things could measure up to being next to him with the sun warming our

backs and smiles brightening our faces. Besides, I was pretty sure it was a Sunday.

“Aurora,” Mom said again, shaking me gently. There was a bit of a tremble in her throat that didn’t sound right. That’s what finally pulled me from my slumber.

“What is it?” I asked, forcing open one eye and then the other.

“I’m afraid I have some bad news,” Mom said, taking a deep sniff and brushing at her cheeks.

I sat up in bed, immediately alarmed. Someone had to be dead. “Is it Grandma Gibson?” I asked, putting my arms around her. My great grandmother was in her nineties, so she was the most likely person I could think of to pass away.

“No.” Mom shook her head as more tears spilt down her cheeks, replacing those she had just wiped away. “I’m sorry. Don’t worry. You don’t have to be alarmed. Everybody’s fine.”

“Then why are you crying?” I wanted to know, thinking maybe she’d gotten a phone call from my jerk-face father, or maybe she’d been laid off or something.

Mom took a deep breath and said, “They found Colette’s body.”

“What?” I said, practically rocketing out of the bed, my heart hammering in my chest. “What do you mean?”

“They finally found Grandma Gibson’s sister.” Mom let out a sob, covering her face with her hands. “What am I going to tell Grams?”

I felt an ice cold shiver creeping up my spine. When it reached my scalp, I could feel my hairs standing up on end one by one. I had a very complicated history with Colette Gibson—more complicated than my mother would ever know. “Where did they find her? What happened?” I asked, struggling for breath and trying to keep a throb from creeping into my voice.

“The chief of police called just a little while ago. He said the construction crew that’s rebuilding the foundation for the town hall

unearthed a body late yesterday afternoon.” Mom took a ragged breath and continued. “There haven’t been that many people who have disappeared around here, so they figured it out pretty quickly. I guess she’s ...” Mom’s shoulders shook as she let out a few more sobs. “I guess she’s very well preserved. It’s been so long since Colette disappeared that they didn’t know who to call, so they called me.” Mom pinched the bridge of her nose as if fighting back a headache. “They wanted to know if I can bring Grandma Gibson down to the morgue to identify the body.”

“Oh, no,” I gasped. “They can’t make her do that. Can’t they just go by DNA or something?” My great grandmother had been mourning the loss of her sister ever since the night Colette disappeared. Grandma was eighteen at the time, and her sister was a year younger—the exact same age I was at that moment—seventeen. It seemed too cruel to make a woman in her nineties show up to identify a body at the morgue. On the other hand, Lillian Gibson had been tortured by not knowing the fate of her beloved sister for almost her entire life. Maybe knowing the truth would give her some peace.

“I’ll go with you,” I found myself saying, even though I hadn’t even fully formed the thought in my head.

“Would you?” Mom asked, catching at my hand. “I’m sorry to ask you to do this, but ... You know how much you remind Grandma Gibson of Lettie and ... I don’t know. I think it might somehow make her feel better if you were there at the morgue.” According to my great grandmother, I was the spitting image of her long-lost sister. Sometimes, when dementia had her in its foggy grip, she even called me Lettie, and we had awkward conversations with me masquerading as the dead girl.

I must have given my mom a horrified look because she quickly added, “Not to identify the body or anything, but just to comfort her if the person they found is Colette.”

I nodded, giving my mom another squeeze. Of course, I had to go. It was the right thing to do. The whole idea terrified me, but I also felt compelled to try to see Colette’s body if I could. It wasn’t just morbid curiosity or anything like that; there was actually a strong chance that I was

somehow the reincarnation of Colette Gibson. Or at least part of me was. Or part of her was me. To be honest, I wasn't sure how the whole reincarnation thing worked. It all seemed pretty crazy to me, but it also seemed crazy that vampires existed, and I knew that they did for a fact. After all, I was dating one.

But the truth was, besides looking like Colette Gibson, I also shared some of her memories. I had always thought they were just bizarre recurring dreams that I'd had my whole life, but numerous conversations with Jessie had shown me otherwise.

I got dressed, and we both wolfed down our breakfast. Mom wanted to get over to the Ashtabula Home for Elder Care as quickly as possible. She didn't want Grandma Gibson to accidentally find out without us there to comfort her.

On the drive over, I stared dully out the car window. The cold, miserable December day was doing a good job mirroring my feelings—such a sharp contrast to the previous night when I had been blissfully happy in Jessie's arms.



## Chapter 2

When we signed in at the retirement home, it was obvious that everyone in the building knew something was up. Several of the staff members were staring at us, speaking in hushed tones, and the woman behind the desk said, “Oh, thank goodness. Lillian is waiting for you.”

The door to Grandma Gibson’s room was open. Normally, whenever we visited her, she was seated at a card table she’d covered with a shawl, looking down at rows of cards she’d laid out in front of her. Until recently, I’d assumed she was playing solitaire, but it turned out she was more interested in trying to see the future.

This time when we walked in, Grandma was sitting very rigidly on the edge of her bed, waiting for us. She had on a wool dress that I’d never seen before, and she was wearing her hat and winter coat. She even had her handbag already hooked over one shoulder.

“Hi, Gram Gram,” Mom said, tentatively approaching her grandmother and kneeling down by her bed.

It was always a crapshoot whether Grandma Gibson was going to be in the present with the rest of us or if her mind had drifted elsewhere. The first few minutes of any visit were usually a little awkward as we tried to get a feel for how she was doing. But this time, Grandma looked her

granddaughter directly in the eyes and said in a very composed voice, “Helen, I’m glad you’re here. Would you please take me down to the Tiburon morgue?”

“Of course, Grams,” Mom said. “That’s why we’re here.”

In a way, it was a relief not to be the ones who had to break the news about Colette to Grandma Gibson. I knew that sounded selfish, but we had to take her to the morgue, which was miserable enough. Who told her? I had to wonder. Was it someone on staff? Another resident? It was so weird that she seemed to know almost before my mom did.

“Aurora?” Grandma Gibson said, reaching out to me. “Would you please help me up?”

I hurried over to the bed, and Grandma got an iron lock on my elbow. “I need your help to get to the car,” she told me as she got to her feet. There was a fierceness in her eyes that I didn’t understand, but I could see pain behind it.

At first, I thought she wanted my help because she felt weak. But as we headed down the hall and toward the lobby, I realized that it was emotional support Grandma Gibson needed. Gossip flourished in the care facility like at any nest of office cubicles or knitting bee. My grandmother pretty much kept to herself, but still everyone knew that her sister had disappeared decades ago and that a body had been recently found.

The Germans have a word, *schadenfreude*, which means a feeling of pleasure derived from someone else’s suffering. That wasn’t exactly what was happening at Ashtabula Care, but it was close. Everyone was staring at us from wheelchairs and walkers. Everyone was practically drooling to find out the details of the murder. It was almost as if I could hear the residents thinking things like “I can’t wait to tell my niece the next time she visits.” They were all bright eyed and more stimulated than I had ever seen anyone in the home.

No one stepped forward with a comforting word or a reassuring smile. They all kept themselves at a discrete distance like photographers documenting a tragedy, waiting for the most acute moment of grief to present itself before snapping the picture.

I hated them. I wanted to hurl swear words at them and make obscene hand gestures to their pitying faces. They were like a bunch of vultures ready to pick over a carcass, wanting to feed off someone else's tragedy. It wasn't just the old folks and staff at the care facility who acted this way; I knew it was human nature—people always slow down to gawk at a car crash—but I hated them nonetheless.

I took my cue from my great grandmother. Where I wanted to cower, concealing myself from their glittering, pitying, thirsty eyes, she held her head high and kept her eyes forward, her expression resolute. She never glanced once to the right or to the left, just made her determined way toward the car. We rode all the way back to Tiburon in silence.

The morgue was weird. It was kind of like a doctor's waiting room with lots of boxes of tissues placed strategically within hand's reach no matter where you were sitting. Most small towns don't necessarily have a morgue, or maybe they have a small facility that is really just a room in an out-of-the-way place in the hospital. But the Vanderlinds were a very generous family when it came to making Tiburon a pleasant place to live. They kept our police force well staffed and our hospital well equipped, to the point that even the recently deceased had a nice place to rest. I found it interesting that vampires were so concerned about the welfare of the dead.

Besides the clerk behind the counter, the waiting room was deserted. Mom and I were both hesitant about how to get started, but Grandma Gibson walked right up to the counter and said in a clear voice, "Lillian Gibson here to identify the body of Colette Gibson."

I don't think that many people came to the Tiburon morgue because the kid behind the counter was chewing gum and reading a comic book called *The Martian Confederacy: Rednecks on the Red Planet*. Surprised and a bit confused, he looked up at my great grandmother. "Uh ..." was all he could manage.

"This is the morgue, isn't it?" Grandma asked, her tone letting him know she was in no mood for incompetence.

“Um, yeah,” he said, putting down his reading. “It’s just, I’ve worked here for eight months and never had anybody come in before.” He got to his feet. “I’ll be right back.”

I tried to take comfort in the fact that not a lot of people had to come to our local morgue to identify a body. That had to be a good thing. We’d barely had time to take a seat when a woman in a lab coat appeared. “Hello. I’m Doctor Kalla,” she said. “Are you Lillian Gibson?” she asked, addressing my great grandmother.

“Yes,” was her reply.

“I’m so sorry we had to call you here today,” the doctor said. She had dark skin, black hair, and a warm speaking voice, like she really did care. “I’m sure this is very hard on you.”

“Can’t you just do a DNA test or something?” my mother interjected. “Do you have to put my grandmother through this?”

“Of course, we will do a DNA test,” the doctor assured her. “I was just about to ask to do a cheek swab. That is the easiest way to get a good sample.”

“So all this is really unnecessary,” Mom said, gesturing toward the room.

“I want to see her,” Grandma Gibson interrupted. “I’m perfectly happy to give you any sample that you need, but I am here to see my sister.” There was no mistaking her determination as she got to her feet.

“Are you sure, Grams?” Mom asked, touching her on the arm.

Grandma Gibson ignored her granddaughter. She turned to the doctor and said, “Is it best to do the swab first or after?”

Dr. Kalla replied, “It’ll just take a minute. I think we should get the sample out of the way. If you’ll just follow me.”

“Aurora, I think you should stay here,” Mom said as we all moved to follow the doctor.

“No,” Grandma Gibson and I said simultaneously.

“I think Aurora should come with us,” Grandma said, clutching tightly at my hand.

I had the feeling that Grandma wanted me there for more than just moral support. She was the only person who knew the truth about Jessie, and she had done everything within her power to keep us apart. Colette Gibson had disappeared on the night she snuck out of her home to elope with Jessie Vanderlind, and my great grandmother was convinced that her sister’s death was his fault.

I knew Grandma was trying to teach me a lesson. It felt like when a parent catches a kid smoking a cigarette and forces him to smoke the whole pack. Catch your great granddaughter dating a vampire? Force her to look at a dead body. The idea terrified me, but I also felt compelled to see Colette. I didn’t know if I was somehow her reincarnation, but I thought that maybe if I could see her, it would clarify things for me. I felt like I had to see her.

“How old are you?” the doctor asked me. She gave a little frown, obviously unsure if it was suitable for me to be in the morgue.

“Seventeen,” my mom supplied.

“I’m going to be eighteen,” I told the doctor. It wasn’t exactly a lie. I had every intention of being eighteen one day, but my birthday was still a good ten months off.

“I guess it’s okay in this specific situation,” Dr. Kalla said. “As long as your family approves.”

My mom relented, and we followed the doctor down a hallway to a small examination room where a swab was used to scrape a few cells off the inside of my great grandmother’s cheek. I was surprised she even knew what DNA testing was, to be honest. It seemed to me that after a certain age, people just couldn’t absorb any more modernization.

After that, we followed the doctor as she yanked open an insulated metal door. It felt like we were entering the meat locker at a butcher shop. Grandma Gibson got a hold of my arm again in a very tight grip. The smell

of spoiled meat and disinfectant assaulted my nose and made my stomach roil.

“This is a unique case for everyone here at the hospital,” the doctor said as we entered. “The body is very different from that of a victim of a car crash or something like that.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“Well,” the doctor said, clicking the button on her pen up and down several times against a clipboard. “It’s more like a mummification. That’s as close as I can get to describing it. I’m sorry to have to phrase it like that, but I want you to be prepared.”

There were several gurneys in the room, but only one had anything on it. The body was covered with a sheet. The doctor walked over to the top of the gurney. “This can be very difficult,” she said to Grandma Gibson. “If you need a chair or want to step out of the room or anything, please let me know.”

As the doctor pulled the sheet down, Grandma Gibson gripped me even tighter, her nails biting into the flesh of my arm. “Lettie,” she said in a small gasp.

The body was curled in a ball; in her last moments of life, Colette Gibson had reverted to the fetal position. Her hair was dark and curly and wild, just like mine. She was wearing a tattered green dress with little white flowers, a dress I had grown to know well from my recurring dreams. Sometimes in my dreams, I wore the dress while in a field of flowers, but usually it was while I was being chased through the dark woods by a bloodthirsty creature.

The flesh on the body was shriveled, stretched tight over the bones. Even though her skin was dark and dry and cracked, the girl’s features were still discernible. It was like seeing a horrifying Halloween mummy dressed up to look exactly like you. I wanted to turn away, but Grandma clung to me too fiercely. Colette had died with her eyes open, staring into some unknown visage. I wondered whose face she’d seen as she gasped her last breath.

“Oh, my beautiful girl.” Grandma Gibson sobbed. “Why?” she wailed. “My poor girl. What did he do to you?”

“What was the cause of death?” my mom asked the doctor, her voice sounding a little wobbly.

“We’re still looking into that, but as far as we know, it was exsanguination,” was the reply.

“She bled to death?” Mom asked. “Is that why she ... Is that why the body looks the way it does?”

“Precisely,” the doctor said with a nod.

“But I don’t see any wounds. She doesn’t appear injured. How could she bleed out?” Mom wanted to know.

“We’re still working on it, but so far it appears that, given the state of preservation, the body was somehow drained entirely of all blood. That’s why it’s so dry.”

My mother shook her head. “Who would do such a thing?”

“I wish I could talk to Mama and Papa,” Grandma said, her voice wet and ragged. “I know it would give them peace just to know what happened to her.”

“I’m sorry to have to ask you this,” the doctor said to Grandma, “but can you positively identify this body as that of your sister, Colette Gibson?”

“Oh, come on,” Mom protested, sounding angry. The answer was obvious, and Grandma was suffering.

“Yes,” Grandma Gibson said between sobs. “That’s her hair. There’s no mistaking it. That’s her dress. Her favorite dress.” Reaching out with one hand, she stroked the corpse’s hair. “She’s my dear girl. My best friend.”

“I’m so sorry,” Dr. Kalla said. “Should I cover her now, or do you need more time?”

“I’d like a minute alone with her,” Grandma Gibson said.

“Of course.” The doctor headed briskly toward the door. “Take all the time you need.”

Mom followed Dr. Kalla, and I expected to go, too, but Grandma Gibson wouldn't release me. "Stay here with me, Aurora. Please," she said in a low voice.

"Okay," I said reluctantly. My head was swimming, and I desperately wanted to run for the door.

"Lettie's death has haunted me my whole life," she said, once we were alone. "I'd always hoped she had eloped and was alive somewhere and happy. But I always kind of knew that it wasn't true. I knew she was gone."

"I'm so sorry, Grams," I said, feeling both nauseated and terrified. It really was like looking at my own dehydrated corpse.

"You know who did this to her, don't you?" Grandma said in a low, harsh voice, claspng my arm tighter. "You know who sank his fangs into her flesh and sucked out her blood until she was nothing but a dried husk. And then he threw her away. Hid his shame by getting rid of her body."

"No," I said, struggling to free my arm. "He wouldn't."

"He did," she hissed, leaning closer to the body and dragging me with her. "Who else could it be? There's no one. He killed my beautiful sister, and now he's come back for my great granddaughter." She was wrenching me around, pressing me toward the hideous corpse; I was only a few inches away. "I'll tell you who killed Colette," Grandma cried. "It was Jessie Vanderlind."

"No!" I screamed.



## **Chapter 3**

“What’s going on?” Mom shouted, charging into the room followed closely by the doctor.

Grandma Gibson released my arm so suddenly that I stumbled backward and crashed into an empty gurney. “Mom,” I sobbed, running over to her and collapsing in her arms.

“I shouldn’t have let her in here,” Dr. Kalla said, mostly to herself. “I should have used better judgment.”

“What happened?” Mom asked, wrapping her arms around me. “Grams? What’s going on?”

“I was just giving my great granddaughter a lesson in what happens when a girl gets involved with the wrong boy,” Grandma Gibson said, not the least bit remorseful for having terrified me.

“Well, I hardly think frightening her with a dead body is the way to do it,” Mom said, her temper rising. She always tried to give me my space but, like any mom, was also very protective of me. “Besides, I don’t think that’s a lesson that Aurora needs to learn. She’s not boy crazy, and I meet everyone she dates.”

“Do you know that she’s seeing someone right now?” the crazed woman formerly known as my great grandmother demanded.

“Yes,” Mom said, straining to hold back her anger. “He came over last night, and he’s a very nice young man.”

“You invited Jessie Vanderlind into your home?” Grandma asked, the color draining from her face.

“Yes. I said he came over,” Mom repeated. “He’s very nice.”

“You let a killer into your house!” Grandma Gibson shrieked. “He killed Colette, and now he’s coming after Aurora!”

Dr. Kalla eventually got Grandma sedated and held for observation overnight. “I think after all these years, the grief just overpowered her,” the doctor said. “I’m sure she’ll be fine in a couple of days.”

I was crying so hard, I wished I could be sedated, too, but I wasn’t the one screaming about how a seventeen-year-old boy had murdered a girl who disappeared before World War II. It was absolutely horrifying to see Grandma Gibson so upset, and I felt doubly guilty knowing that there was a strong chance she was right. None of the hospital staff knew that, of course. They all just thought she was losing her battle with dementia.

I managed to pull myself together a little once we were in the car and headed home. Mom must have been a little shell shocked herself, but she still tried to comfort me. “I’m so sorry, sweetheart,” she said, reaching over and rubbing my back as we waited at a red light. “I don’t even know how to

explain Grams's behavior. I'm really sorry I asked you to go with me. I just ...” She gave a big sniff as the light turned green and she turned to concentrate on the road. “I was just frightened and didn't want to face everything by myself. That was stupid of me. I shouldn't have put you through that.”

“No, it's okay,” I assured her, forcing myself to sound less upset. None of this was my mom's fault, and I didn't want her suffering because of choices Colette and I had made. “I feel bad that I lost it. But Grandma really freaked me out. And then the body was just so horrible. It's just ...” I forced myself not to break down into tears again. “It's just, Grandma Gibson always talks about how much I look like her sister. I never thought I did from her old photographs, but looking at the body ... Well, I could really see it. I really do look like her. And I was just wondering ... Do you think it's possible ...”

“What?” Mom asked gently, giving me the space to breathe.

“Do you believe in reincarnation?” I finally blurted.

“Oh.” Mom nodded her head up and down several times. “I understand. I wasn't putting the whole thing together, but now it makes sense.”

“What does?” I wanted to know. I felt a mild sense of alarm, but there was no way she could have figured everything out.

“Aunt Colette was working at the Vanderlind Castle when she disappeared. Grams told me once that she thought Lettie had run off with one of the sons.” Mom pulled into the driveway and clicked the button to open the garage. “And now you're dating one of the Vanderlinds. I think she got confused and somehow decided he was the same boy.”

I gulped. “Yeah, maybe.”

“And to answer your question, no. I don't believe in reincarnation,” she said while we both sat in the car with the doors locked waiting for the garage door to completely close.

“But I do look a lot like Colette Gibson,” I pointed out.

“You do look like her from what I can tell, but I think that’s genetics, honey. Not reincarnation,” she said, finally opening the car door.

I wanted to tell her the truth. I had a good relationship with my mom and I was used to being able to confide in her. I opened my mouth to start, but the words just didn’t come out. I didn’t even know where to begin. How could I explain that in many ways, Grandma Gibson was right? Yes, in fact, I was dating the same boy that Colette was in love with all those years ago. And if I was being perfectly honest with myself, there was a strong chance that he was the one that killed her.

I didn’t know how I felt about Jessie coming to see me that evening. He’d said he wanted to drop by to start courting me properly. Up until a few weeks ago, we’d mostly been focused on survival rather than dating. I desperately wanted to see Jessie yet was also terrified. I couldn’t believe that he had killed Colette, but it was the most likely explanation as to how she’d died. I felt like I was being torn in two—half of me loving Jessie so much that I couldn’t believe he would ever do something so evil and the other half knowing that it was his nature to be a killer.

I remembered reading about how serial killer Ted Bundy’s mother refused to believe her son was guilty. Even after he was convicted of numerous hideous murders, she just couldn’t accept the fact that her darling boy had done those horrible things. I began to wonder if I was suffering from the same delusions as poor Mrs. Bundy. Was my love for Jessie blinding me to his actions?

No, I couldn’t believe it. Every time I thought about it, I started shaking my head, my body fighting against my brain.

“Sweetie, why don’t you just go to bed?” Mom asked as I sat at the kitchen table, staring morosely at nothing.

“Jessie’s supposed to show up any minute now,” I told her. “I’d call him and cancel, but he doesn’t have a cell phone.”

My mom gave a theatrical double take. “There’s a teenager in America without a cell phone? I can’t believe I haven’t read about this on Yahoo

News.”

I knew she was trying to lift my spirits, but it wasn’t working. I was too conflicted and miserable. Instead, I ended up just giving a heavy sigh. “They don’t get good cell reception at the castle.”

I knew for a fact that there was no cell reception at the Vanderlind Castle, the giant fortress where Jessie lived, because I had once tried to call for help from inside the stone walls, and I couldn’t even get one tiny bar of reception.

“Go take a shower and climb in bed,” Mom told me. “You look exhausted. I’ll tell Jessie you don’t feel well, and he can call you from a landline tomorrow.”

“Okay,” I said, getting to my feet. I’d developed a throbbing headache, and no matter how much I wanted to see Jessie, I knew I was in no state, mentally or physically, to be with him.

I stood in the shower for a long time. Usually I didn’t linger because we were on a budget and I didn’t want to run up our bills. This time I couldn’t help it. I lost track of what I was doing as I stared at the tiles on the wall. I couldn’t remember if I’d already shampooed and just needed conditioner or what. By the time I finished up, the water had turned cold.

Shivering, I quickly changed into my pajamas and scurried into bed. My hair would be a fright wig in the morning, but I just didn’t have the energy to blow it dry. I lay in bed staring at the ceiling, rubbing my Pools of Light pendant across my lips. It was a natural crystal stone, flawless and cut into a perfect sphere. The orb was held in place by a belt of white gold that had flowers and vines crafted into the metal. Jessie had given it to me as a token of his affection when we first met, and it was my most cherished object. Originally, I had believed it was silver, but vampires can’t touch silver without being burned—something I learned firsthand in the worst possible way when Jessie had a silver net thrown over his head and was painfully seared. Fortunately, vampires also have an incredible power to heal. I would love him even if he was permanently disfigured, but it was nice that his gorgeous face was still perfect.

*No, I chastised myself. You are not to let your brain drift off thinking about how much you love Jessie. You have to think about if he's responsible for the death of Colette.*

There was a gentle tapping at my window and I froze, caught between joy and panic. It could only be Jessie out there on the porch roof on a cold night in December, wanting to talk to me. But did I want to talk to him? My body screamed yes, tear open the window, and fling yourself into his arms. My brain was more cautious. I absolutely could not believe Jessie Vanderlind was a killer, but I knew the fable of the scorpion and the frog: the scorpion stings the frog while riding on his back crossing a river. With his last breath as the venom paralyzes him, the frog asks, "Why? Why did you sting me?"

And the scorpion replies as he sinks beneath the water to meet his own death, "I couldn't help it. It's my nature."

I couldn't believe that Jessie Vanderlind had sucked the life out of Colette Gibson; he loved her too dearly. But it was a vampire's nature to drink the blood of humans. The smartest thing I could do was not open the window.

"Aurora," I heard Jessie whisper from outside. His voice sounded ragged, and I could tell he was in pain. My mother must have unwittingly told him about the discovery of Colette's body. I wanted to spring from my bed, fling open the window, and wrap my arms around him, but my brain kept telling me *no*. "Please," Jessie said. I heard a gentle thud, and I knew he was resting his forehead against the glass. "Your mom told me ..." His breath caught, and he didn't continue.

My body did a quick coup d'état and overthrew my brain. I was out of bed and dashing across the room before I even realized it. "Jessie," I cried, tearing back the curtains and wrenching open the window.

Jessie looked even paler than usual. A single tear ran down his cheek, tracking silver in the crisp air of a winter night. He clutched a bouquet of disheveled red roses in both hands, their petals tumbling into the dusting of snow that swirled around his feet. "They found her," he managed to say,

although his voice was very tight. “They found Colette. They found her body.”

“I know,” I said, opening my arms and reaching out to him. All I wanted to do was hold him and make it all better.

He didn’t move any closer, just shook his head rapidly back and forth. “Did you see her? Did you see Lettie?”

I nodded, lowering my arms. I felt empty without him. “Mom and I went to the morgue with Grandma Gibson.”

“And Lily confirmed it was definitely her?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“Could the coroner tell how she died?” Jessie wanted to know, his mannerisms very stiff.

I stared at him for a few seconds, unsure of what to say. Did he kill Colette and somehow not remember doing it? Finally, gathering my nerve, I told him, “The doctor said she was exsanguinated.”

A breeze kicked up, ruffling Jessie’s hair. He shuddered. “From a wound or from ...” Taking a deep breath, he forced himself to finish. “Or from a vampire?”

“I couldn’t see any wound,” I admitted. “The doctor said they don’t know for sure yet what caused her death.”

Jessie turned away from me. “I have to see her. I have to know.”

“You can’t. She’s in the morgue,” I told him. I sincerely doubted the morgue of a small town like Tiburon was open all night. “I’m sure it’s closed.”

“I can get in,” he said with decided determination.

“Jessie, I don’t think you should.” I gulped before adding, “At least not by yourself.”

Giving me a fierce look that I knew was concealing pain, he said between clenched teeth, “I have to.”

“Then take me with you,” I said, leaning out the window into the icy wind and reaching for his hand, my wet hair making my scalp ache. “You can’t see her by yourself. You’ll need me there.”

“No,” he said, jerking away from me. The next thing I knew, the roof was empty but for a few red rose petals blowing in the snow. Jessie was gone.



## Chapter 4

I had the dream. The one I had come to know and dread. It wasn't unexpected. I had closed my eyes knowing there was probably no way for me to avoid it. The dream had become so familiar, it was almost like a memory. But I knew it was more likely a residual memory from Colette Gibson. That didn't make the dream any less terrifying.

It started at night—it was always night—and I was sneaking out of the house. Not the house I shared with my mother—a larger house with beautiful wood floors that I also thought of as my home. I felt conflicted; a big part of me wanted to stay safe and snug in my bed with my sister's steady breathing coming from the other side of the room, but I also felt

compelled to go. He was waiting for me, and more than anything, I wanted to be in his arms.

Quietly, I slipped out of bed and put on my favorite dress—green with little white flowers. The fabric was a little light for fall, but I didn't mind. It was going to be my wedding dress. By the light of the full moon, I pinned on a small straw hat with silk daisies along the brim.

Making as little noise as possible, I slid a small suitcase out from under my bed. I had packed it that afternoon while no one else was around. I only took a few of my best things; I wasn't planning to be gone that long. And when I returned, I would be a bride. His bride. Just thinking about it made me feel all warm and rosy.

Once outside, I started to hurry. I knew I had to get away, or I would change my mind. It's not that I didn't want to marry him—I wanted to rather desperately—but I felt miserable sneaking off to do it. Still, he said his family would never approve, and I knew mine would insist I wait until I was eighteen. But the way I felt about him, I knew I couldn't wait. All I wanted was to be Mrs. Jessie Vanderlind. It was something I needed to be before I could think of anything else.

Then time hopped around, like it usually does in dreams, and I found myself in the woods gasping for breath. My hat was gone; my suitcase was gone; and I was terrified because I knew I was not alone. There was something out there, skulking beneath the trees, and it was hungry, hungry for human flesh, hungry for my flesh. I somehow knew the beast was there specifically stalking me.

A noise behind me gave me a start, and I ran headlong, deeper into the woods and away from the road, away from my only chance to flag down a passing car or signal someone in a nearby house. Branches tore at my dress, and one of my shoes was gone. My foot got tangled in a tree root, and I fell to the ground with a sob. My lungs ached from running.

I freed my leg but did not immediately get to my feet again. I needed to calm down and catch my breath. There was a large log next to where I fell, and it afforded me some protection from the eyes of the predator. I just

needed to rest for a moment and come up with a plan. I wished I knew what was pursuing me so I could better figure out how to defend myself.

Time fast forwarded. I was breathing more regularly, and I was feeling like I should make a move. The small creatures that provide the night with its music had taken up their melodies again. I thought that maybe the beast, whatever it was, had moved on in pursuit of some other dinner. With great caution, I got to my feet.

And there he was, my love, standing no more than thirty yards away, silhouetted in the moonlight. “Jessie,” I called to him, my heart hammering loudly in my chest. “We have to get out of here. There’s something ...” I started hurrying toward him. “I don’t know what it is, but there’s something in the woods.”

Jessie came bounding toward me, eager to be by my side. It was only when it was too late for me to run that I realized I hadn’t called out to the man I intended to marry; I had summoned the beast. I barely had time to scream before it sank its teeth into the flesh of my throat.

Things were blurry after that; everything grew very dim. The world only came into focus when my body was jarred, quite painfully. I opened my eyes to see that I’d been dropped into some kind of ditch. There was loose soil all around me. I could barely move, but I turned my head to see the man who killed me standing at the lip of the deep hole where I lay. Just then the clouds drifted away from the moon, and I was able to see more clearly as Jessie Vanderlind started kicking dirt into the hole to cover my body. “Why?” bubbled to my lips and then faded away to nothing.

I woke with a start, my chest aching with fright. I was alone; I was safe in bed; I was myself again. I reached for my dream journal, which I kept by my bed. It was true that I’d had that same dream many times, but the dream had never gone that far before. I didn’t know if I’d just added the details from what I’d learned that day about Colette’s death or if they were uncovered memories. Either way, it took me over an hour to fall asleep again, even after pouring all of my thoughts out into the journal. I hated when I dreamed I was Colette.

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By the time I got up Monday morning, the entire town knew about Colette. It was headline news for the Tiburon Sentinel: “Local Girl’s Body Found Eighty Years After She Elopes.” The Sentinel was barely clinging to life as a small-town newspaper, so I guess they were making the most of the story. Someone must have done some quick digging in the archives because there were old quotes from Colette’s parents about how they believed she had eloped but were growing concerned because they hadn’t heard from her. A second article referenced a tramp being arrested for trying to sell some of Colette’s clothing, which he claimed he found in an abandoned suitcase in the woods. A search of the area was done, where Colette’s hat and one of her shoes were found, but no one ever saw her again. The evidence against the tramp wasn’t enough to keep him, so he was released. There was absolutely no mention of the Vanderlinds. I didn’t know if that was because no one suspected them or if their money protected them. Either way, it didn’t sound like Tiburon police investigations were very thorough back then.

I dreaded going to school. Not that it would be the same misery as getting Grandma Gibson to the car through the gauntlet of walkers at the old age home, but teenage boys could be pretty insensitive about anyone’s pain but their own. My mom once told me about her math teacher in high school whose son was a jet pilot that had died in a crash. The boys in her class would make paper airplanes with flames drawn on them and fly them at the poor lady when her back was turned. Mom said a couple times a year the woman would get so upset she’d have to leave the classroom, and all the guys would think it was hysterical. I didn’t expect to be treated with any more consideration. And Colette was only a distant relative, as far as anyone knew, so the inappropriate humor would probably flow pretty freely.

I was barely out of my car in the school parking lot before Don Updike felt the need to shout at me, “Hey, Aurora. How’s your mummy?” The guys he was walking with all cracked up.

“Good one,” a buddy of his said, high-fiving him.

“Don,” a low voice snarled from off to the left somewhere. I turned to see my ex-boyfriend, Fred Lighton, swiftly striding across the parking lot. He stopped about an inch away from Don and looked down at the smaller boy. “What the hell do you think you’re doing?”

Fred was tall and muscular and on the football team. In fact, I was kind of an idiot because I’m the one that broke up with him. It didn’t feel right to be with anyone but Jessie. If I was sane and living the life of a normal high school girl, I would have been madly in love with Fred.

Don Updike, on the other hand, was on the squirrely side. He was always getting in trouble for being obnoxious to teachers or other students or anyone who was in earshot. He was definitely the kind of boy who would throw paper airplanes at a woman who had lost her son in a plane crash. I could tell he was intimidated by Fred standing so close to him, but he didn’t want to show it. “I was just making a joke, dude,” he said, trying not to flinch. “What’s your problem?”

“My problem,” Fred said, leaning menacingly over the smaller boy, “is that you’re being insensitive. How would you like it if someone in your family was murdered and then some little twerp was making fun of you for it?”

“That would be cool,” Don said. “I’d love to have a mummy in the family.” He was still trying to show off to his friends.

Fred slowly shook his head back and forth. “You think it would be cool for someone in your family to be murdered?”

“Totally,” Don insisted. “I would think it’s a riot.”

“Let me get this straight,” Fred said, still looming over him. “So your mom’s crying and your grandmother’s so upset they have to put her in the hospital, and that’s somehow funny to you?” A couple more people had stopped to watch what was going on.

“Yeah,” Don said, although you could tell he was no longer sure of himself with the way Fred had phrased it. “It’s hilarious.”

“What’s wrong with you?” Fred asked, giving the smaller boy a concerned look. About a dozen people were now taking in the show.

“Nothing,” Don insisted. “Hey, I’m not the one acting all uptight. I was just making a joke.”

“No, I think there’s something wrong with you,” Fred told him. “Maybe you should go see a therapist or something.”

That’s when Don busted out the F word. He took two steps back before he said it, of course.

“Seriously?” Fred asked. “That’s all you’ve got?”

Don repeated his expletive while simultaneously trying not to appear like he was scared witless. He probably assumed he was reasonably safe, seeing that Tiburon High had a zero tolerance policy for fighting on school grounds, but you couldn’t spend your life on school grounds.

“You’re pathetic.” Fred shook his head again. “Seek help, dude.”

“Whatever,” Don said as he slunk off, tail between his legs.

Fred turned to me. “You okay?” he asked.

“Yeah,” I told him. “But thanks for standing up for me.”

“My mom told me about your grandma,” he said. “Is she okay?”

That was a complex question, and I wasn’t sure of the answer, but I said, “I think she’ll be all right. It was pretty horrible, though.”

Nodding, Fred said, “Sorry to hear that.” A bell rang, causing all us students to start scurrying. “You know where I am if you need me.” With that, he turned and headed into the school. I stared after him for a moment. When Fred first started flirting with me, I thought he was just a friendly jock. Then we tried dating and he got all sexually entitled, like some guys tend to do, and I thought he was a bit of a jerk. But he quickly matured past that nonsense and was turning into a pretty awesome guy. The kind of guy girls dream about. The kind of guy I should have been dreaming about if I wasn’t totally in love with a vampire. I wondered, and not for the first time, if I needed my head examined.

“Wow,” I heard someone say, interrupting my thoughts. That’s when I noticed my best friend, Blossom, was at my elbow, her gaze trailing after Fred. “Now that’s something you never see in a teen movie.”

“What?” I wanted to know.

“A handsome jock standing up to a geek bully.”

“Yeah.” I had to agree with her. “That was pretty bizarre.” It was time for school to start, but I sincerely did not want to go to class. Don Updike wasn’t the only wag out there. I knew more “humor” would be directed my way, and I was feeling pretty fragile.

“I think I might start crushing on Fred a little after that,” Blossom said, grabbing my arm and towing me toward the building.

“Go for it,” I told her. “Fred’s great.” And I sincerely meant it.

“I would,” she said, “if I didn’t want you two to get back together so much.”

The mummy joke was a hit at Tiburon High. There wasn’t a dork in the school who didn’t feel the need to get in on the hilarity. I was mercifully spared the jocks’ humor on the subject by way of Fred. Even though we were no longer dating, he obviously felt very protective of me and made it known in the locker room circles that he would not feel very friendly toward anyone who made a joke at my family’s expense. I was profoundly grateful, and I wished I could think of a way to show him my appreciation. Besides getting back together with him, of course.

“Let’s sneak out for lunch,” Blossom said as we passed each other in the hall between classes.

“It’s Monday,” I pointed out. Seniors had off-campus privileges for lunch but not on Mondays for some reason. It was something about “starting the week off right.”

“Oh, please.” Blossom rolled her eyes. “If anyone tries to stop us, I’ll say that you’re too stressed out from everyone in the school being insensitive and that you need a break.”

“And what about you?” I had to ask.

Blossom laid a hand to her chest and said in her sincerest voice, “I am being a good friend.”

Once we had successfully made a break from school and were happily munching on fries in the closest fast food restaurant, Blossom asked, "So, how are you holding up?"

I shrugged, focusing on dipping a fry in ketchup.

"Sorry I didn't call you over the weekend," Blossom said. "I was at my dad's, and I didn't even know anything had happened until my mom told me late last night."

"That's okay. I knew you were at your dad's," I told her. "How was it?"

"The usual," she said. I couldn't tell if her indifference was feigned or genuine. "How's Grandma Gibson?"

"In the hospital. She had a bit of a meltdown," I explained.

Blossom sipped her soda contemplatively. "I don't blame her. And how are you doing?"

"Okay," I said with a shrug. "Seeing the body was pretty scary. She really did look like me."

"They let you see the body?" Blossom practically choked on her drink. When I nodded, Blossom added, "Whoa." And a little bit after that she asked, "Were you even tempted to call Fred for a little male comfort?"

"Not really." Even though Blossom was my best friend, she knew nothing about Jessie and me. I felt like a lousy BFF for keeping it a secret, but my relationship with Jessie had been pretty tumultuous up to that point. But seeing that Jessie had met my mom, I felt like I had to fess up to my best friend as well. Not about the vampire thing, obviously, but that I was seeing someone. "Actually," I began. "I am kind of seeing someone new."

Blossom did a double take. "Who?" she demanded. "Is it that Lenny kid from history? Because if you're dating him over Fred, I am going to strangle you."

"No. He doesn't go to Tiburon," I told her. "But you have met him."

"Aurora, tell me right now," she said, almost sounding angry. "Don't make me beat it out of you."



I took a deep breath and then blurted, “Jessie Vanderlind.”

Blossom’s mouth literally fell open. She stared at me for a good ten seconds, completely speechless. Finally, she managed to say, “You’re kidding. Dreamboat?”

I couldn’t help but crack into a broad smile. “Yeah. He is pretty dreamy.” The first glimpse I’d had of Jessie was at the library with Blossom. That was back in the fall. She’d started referring to him as dreamboat, and it was a pretty darn apt description.

“How did this all happen?” she wanted to know.

“The library,” I told her. “I ran into him again at the library, and we started talking.”

“The library?” Blossom wrinkled her nose. “That’s like meeting your future husband at the Laundromat.”

I was a bigger fan of books than Blossom was. “Anyway, I ran into him one night and then again the next week, and things kind of took off from there.”

Blossom scowled at me. “Why didn’t you tell me? Are we best friends or not?”

“I didn’t want to jinx it,” I told her. “I mean, who would have guessed that the hottest guy I’ve ever met would be interested in me?”

After a bit more frowning, she said, “I guess I understand. I mean, it’s kind of like seeing a unicorn or something. You’re afraid if you tell anyone, you’ll scare it off.”

I had to laugh. Blossom was being weirdly understanding. “Exactly.”

Leaning in all confidentially, Blossom asked, “So, are you dating dating? I mean, like, have you kissed him and everything?”

“More than that,” I told her, a devilish laugh escaping my lips.

“Why you little sneak. No wonder you wanted to ditch Fred,” she exclaimed. “And here I was, telling you to get back together with him.”

The rest of lunch I spent giving her what details I was willing to share. Nothing of vampires or anything like that—basically, the information I'd already told my mom with a few more details about his expertise as a kisser and how I was ready, willing, and eager to fling my virginity out the window.

"I don't blame you," Blossom said with a heavy sigh that came out as a light whistle. "He's movie star good looking. And you say he's nice? Geez! I'd fork over my virginity for that in a heartbeat. I didn't think there were any guys like that alive on the planet."

I swallowed a sip of my soda the wrong way and had a bit of a coughing fit.

It felt good to tell Blossom the truth. Or at least, part of the truth. I hated keeping secrets from the people I was close to, and Jessie had been the biggest secret of my life.

Back at school, I was sitting in my next class when one of the office ladies came in and had a whispered conversation with the teacher. They kept glancing in my direction, so I wasn't surprised when I was told to go with the lady back to the school offices. "You need to call your mom," she told me, then left me alone at her desk for a few minutes so I would have a bit of privacy.

My hands were shaking so badly I was having trouble dialing. We were supposed to go see about springing Grandma Gibson from the hospital when I was done with school, and I had the horrible feeling it was no longer necessary.

"Mom, it's Aurora," I said, clamping the phone's receiver way too tightly to my ear. "What's going on?"

"Oh, Aurora," Mom said, sounding entirely too stressed but not all that tearful. "I need you to drive over to the hospital to be with Grams," she said. "Something bad has happened."

"What?" I asked, feeling my stomach lurch.

Mom cleared her throat to steady her voice and then finally said,  
“Somebody stole Aunt Colette’s body.”

## Chapter 5

What is wrong with people? That was the question I found myself pondering over and over again as I drove to the hospital. Mom couldn't get away from work, and she wanted someone to be with Grandma Gibson, so I was let out of school early.

Who breaks into a morgue and steals a body? It had to be some kind of sick prank. Someone must have thought it was hilarious. As if a person who died eighty years ago doesn't deserve the same respect as a person who died eight hours ago. It made me think of that outlaw, Elmer McCurdy, whose body was discovered, sixty-five years after his death, being used as a prop at an amusement park. He'd been exhibited for so long that no one even remembered he was human anymore. His corpse had been unwittingly spray painted neon and hung from the rafters. The idea that some jackholes had stolen Colette's body and that she might one day end up as a Halloween decoration brought tears to my eyes. People could be so sick.

When I pulled into the visitor's lot at the hospital, I was surprised to see several news vans parked there with camera crews scurrying about. For a

minute I wondered, “What’s going on?” but then I felt my stomach drop, and a slight sense of foreboding came over me. “Please, don’t be here about Colette,” I whispered to myself.

In the lobby, I approached the information desk and said in a low voice, “Hi, I’m here to visit Lillian Gibson. Can you tell me which room she’s in?”

The lady at the desk gave me a very suspicious look. “What’s your relationship to Ms. Gibson?”

“I’m her great granddaughter,” I told her.

The woman’s face softened a little. “What’s your name?”

“Aurora Keys.”

She scanned a list that was sitting on her desk. I could see there were only a few names on it. When she looked up again, her face had become kind. “Of course, honey. We’re just trying to keep things from becoming a circus around here.” After checking my identification she covertly wrote something on a piece of paper, folded it, and then handed it to me. “Go to the top floor,” she said in a whisper, leaning forward in her seat. “Then switch elevators to come back down to the correct floor. That’s her room number,” she said, indicating the piece of paper she’d just handed me.

My stomach twisted into a triple knot. The camera crews were at the hospital about Colette. I guess her discovery and then disappearance was too tempting of a story for the entertainment media, purporting to be news, to ignore. As I headed for the elevator, a blonde news reporter stepped into my path. She shoved a microphone in my face and said, “Hi, I’m Stacey Coogan with News Channel Five. Do you mind if I ask you a few questions? Who do you think stole your grandmother’s body?”

Right behind her was a guy wielding a camera that he had been concealing under his coat. The camera had a very bright light on top of it that blasted my eyes, making me see big blurry spots. I threw a hand up in front of my face to shield me from the light, shoved the microphone from my mouth with the other hand, and snarled at the reporter, “Get away from me, you cockroach.”

Security showed up and quickly ushered the news crew out of the lobby. “Who let them in here?” someone in a police uniform barked. “Sorry about that, young lady,” the man said, his voice much kinder when addressing me. “Are you all right?”

“I’m fine,” I told him, blinking back tears as I stabbed at the elevator button. “What the hell do they want, anyway?”

The officer shrugged. “They’re just hungry for a story. Never mind about all the wars and shootings and white collar crimes that happen. I guess they think it’s more important to harass some poor old lady in the hospital.”

“Well, thanks for getting them out of here,” I said, hoping the elevator would arrive soon. I was grateful but also desperate to get away from the prying eyes of the lobby.

“Thank you for the best line I’ve heard in a long time,” he said with a smile. “I’m going to tell my daughter that you called her favorite reporter a cockroach.” He glared after the departing news woman. “She deserved it.”

Thankfully, the elevator chimed and the door opened. I stepped in and hit the top button, sparing a smile for the cop before the doors closed again. Once the elevator started moving, I opened the scrap of paper the lady at the desk had given me. Grandma Gibson was in room 444. When I arrived at the correct floor, I knew which room she was in immediately because there was a security guard standing out front. I guess someone had radioed up to him to tell him I was coming because I didn’t have to say a thing; he just stepped to one side.

I tapped at the door before walking in. “Hi, Gran. It’s Aurora,” I said, tentatively poking my head in the room.

I didn’t know what I was expecting, but it wasn’t to see Grandma Gibson sitting up in bed watching an old episode of *Friends*. “Hello, Aurora,” she said to me as if a guard outside her door was how things normally went when I dropped by. “Shouldn’t you be at school? It’s not even three o’clock.”

“Mom got me out early so I could come see you,” I told her. “She was worried that ... um ... well, she just thought you might like some company.”

“You mean because of what happened to Colette’s body?” she asked, almost matter-of-factly.

“Well, yeah ...” I said, taken aback by her frankness. “I mean, it’s not like anyone expected that to happen.”

“I did,” she said, turning her eyes back to the television screen.

“You expected someone was going to break into the morgue and steal your sister’s body?” I asked, a bit incredulously.

She nodded. “I saw it happen. And I saw who did it,” she informed me, nodding toward a deck of cards on the nightstand next to her bed. Cards were how Grandma Gibson tried to read the future. She must have persuaded someone on staff to get her a pack from the hospital gift shop.

*Oh, no, I thought. Not future-predicting great grandma.* Of all the different flavors of Grandma Gibson, the fortune-telling version was the one I liked the least. I really, really didn’t want to know but couldn’t help myself from asking, “Who do you think took Colette?”

“You know who did it,” she said, not bothering to look at me. “I saw him break into the morgue. He took her body to hide the evidence of his crime.”

“He wouldn’t,” I stammered. She didn’t have to say his name for me to know who she was talking about. “He loved her.”

“Sometimes people kill what they love,” she said, steadfastly staring at the television screen but not really watching it.

“Grandma, I know you’re upset, but I’m sure it’s not him,” I said, trying to keep my voice as soothing as possible. “It’s probably just some heartless prank by some frat boys or something.”

“You should ask him,” she said; then she blew a little air out of her nose in a snort of disgust. “See what he has to say for himself.”

“I know you don’t believe me, but he’s devastated by all of this,” I told her. “It’s tearing him apart.”

“Good,” she said, folding her arms. “He deserves all the suffering he can get.”

I spent over three hours with Grandma Gibson before my mom showed up. I had thought being there would be hell, but we mostly just watched television. She’d said what she wanted to say, and I had no plausible argument to back my denial. While we sat there, I had lots of time to think about Grandma Gibson. Before I got involved with Jessie, she had been slipping further and further into dementia, but recently she had become much more lucid. Somehow, my being with a vampire had cleared her mind. She usually played it pretty smart. I think she knew that if she started telling people my boyfriend was a vampire, she would end up on some pretty heavy medication, and that would take her out of the fight. As it was, she kept her knowledge of Jessie from everyone but me.

Mom had better luck getting through the lobby than I’d had. Either security had been increased or the reporters had knocked off to go to dinner. Either way, I snuck out the back of the hospital through a staff entrance that a friendly orderly was kind enough to tell me about. The hospital had decided to keep Grandma Gibson for another night, but I think they were just being kind because of all the press.

I made myself a sandwich for dinner and sent a couple reassuring texts in response to messages I’d received from Blossom and Fred. Previously, I had been trying to minimize contact with Fred as much as possible. Not because he wasn’t a great guy, but because I didn’t want him to think there was a chance we might get back together. He thought he was competing with Jessie for my affections, but there was no competition; I was Jessie’s—heart and soul. I wondered if there was a way for me to promote a relationship between him and Blossom. He had proven without a doubt that he was a guy worth having.



I thought Jessie would come by, but I didn't know if he'd use the door or the window. I was kind of expecting window, so I was mildly surprised when, at nine o'clock, there was a light knocking at our front door.

My impulse was to fling the door open so that I could be in Jessie's arms all the faster, but I forced common sense to prevail and actually pulled back the curtain and peeked through the window first. There Jessie stood with a festively wrapped, square box in his hands. He looked out of place on our front porch, like when you see a photograph of a lynx lounging at the gate of a foreclosed mansion. I actually preferred it when he floated out of the sky to land on the back porch roof, descending like cherry blossom petals from a branch in the spring.

"Hello," Jessie said as I yanked opened the door. I could tell he was miserable, but he still had a smile for me.

"Come in," I said, opening the door wider.

He only hesitated a moment before crossing the threshold. It was obvious that it gave him some struggle, but he did it gracefully. All of his movements were those of a lithe jungle cat. "I brought you some chocolates," he said, handing me the beautifully wrapped box.

"Thank you," I said as I accepted them. Noting that the package was from a local chocolatier, I asked, "Did you send Viggo out for them?" Viggo was the tallest man I had ever met. He worked at the castle and was particularly loyal to Jessie.

"No," he said with a small smile. "That's the beauty of winter. I can actually go out before the shops close."

I wondered at the thrill some clerk must have felt, having Jessie show up in the store. I know I would probably have tripped over myself to give him excellent customer service. "Thank you," I said again, running my hand over the thick plum and gold paper. "The box is beautiful."

"My pleasure," he said, still keeping himself at a polite distance.

"By the way," I told him. "My mom isn't home."

“Oh. Well, in that case ...” Jessie stepped forward and swept me into a low dip. His one hand supported me at the small of my back, and the other was behind my neck. He bent and let his lips brush lightly across mine before pulling back a few inches, making me gasp, teasing me for a moment before bending again to encompass me in a passionate embrace. There is the expression “swept off her feet,” and that’s how Jessie made me feel, both figuratively and literally.

For those few passionate moments, I forgot about my great grandmother and the crazy reporters and the disappearance of Colette’s body. Hell, I practically forgot to breathe. I just let myself fully relish the moment.

He set me on my feet again, and I regained my equilibrium. My troubles immediately resurfaced when he asked, “How is Lily?”

It was weird that Jessie had known my great grandmother when she was a young woman. It was something that I didn’t think I would ever get used to. “Not great,” I told him. “They’re keeping her another night. I don’t know if you noticed, but there are a lot of reporters in town.”

“I did notice,” he told me, keeping hold of my hand as I led him into the living room so we could sit on the couch. “And that’s all because of Colette?”

I shrugged. “I guess it’s a slow news week.” That wasn’t the truth. I was sure there were plenty of disasters going on in the world that deserved more attention than our tiny slice of misery did, but the discovery, and then subsequent disappearance, of Colette’s body was the type of “news” that brought out the gawker in people. But while we were on the subject, I screwed up my nerve and asked, “Did you go to the morgue last night?”

We both took a seat on the couch, and Jessie pulled me close so I was sitting snugly next to him. “Yes,” he said simply. “I didn’t think I was strong enough to see her, but in a weird way, I’m glad I went. Even though it’s been almost eighty years, seeing her body made me realize that she is truly gone.”

His face looked so sorrowful that all I wanted to do was kiss him and tell him everything was going to be all right. But I had to be smart. I couldn’t let my passion for him overthrow my brain and sense of self-

preservation. “What do you think caused her death?” I asked, feeling terrified but forcing myself to form the question.

“A vampire,” he said with conviction. “She was killed by a vampire. There’s no doubt in my mind.”

“But how?” I asked, my voice just above a whisper. I knew Jessie would never intentionally hurt me, but something had obviously gone horribly wrong in the woods all those years ago.

Jessie let out a long, soul-shuddering sigh. “Someone must have been passing through Tiburon. A vampire, I mean. Maybe even a friend of the family who intended to visit us at the castle.”

“But who would have done it?” I asked. From what Jessie had told me, most modern vampires tried to keep a very low profile, only feeding from blood donated to blood banks or voluntarily given by companions who were attached to a specific vampire.

“I don’t know, but I’m going to find out,” he said fiercely. “This is my fault. It’s my fault that Colette is dead. I count her murder as my doing. She would have never been out in those woods if it wasn’t for me.”

“You couldn’t have known,” I told him. “Whoever killed her probably had no idea that you were in love with her. He just stumbled across a girl alone in the woods and let his appetite take over.” Even as I said the words, they felt false. In my dreams, I always knew the beast was specifically pursuing me. It hated me. It wanted me dead even more than it wanted to drink my blood. But it couldn’t have been Jessie. It just couldn’t have. I don’t know why my brain had somehow fused Jessie to that night, but it had, and all I could do about it was ignore the whole thing or tell him.

I decided to ignore it.

Jessie interrupted my thoughts by asking, “Has your family made arrangements for Colette’s burial? Because I would be more than happy to help in any way I can.”

I guess I gave him such a look that he immediately knew something was wrong. “What?” he asked.

“I thought you would have heard,” I stammered. “There was a breakin at the morgue and ...” I took a deep breath and blurted, “Colette’s body is gone.”

Jessie shot to his feet. “What are you talking about?” he all but shouted at me.

“Someone stole Colette Gibson’s body from the Tiburon morgue,” I told him. “My great grandmother did her future-seeing thing again, and she somehow thinks it was you.” I couldn’t look him in the eye when I said it. The words felt like an accusation, and I didn’t want to put him on trial.

His mouth opened slightly, but no words came out. He was staring at me, gasping a little like one of those Asian goldfish. Finally, he said, “Do you think I took her body?”

I shook my head. “No,” I whispered, and for some reason, I felt like I was going to cry. “I just wish we knew who did.”

Jessie ran his fingers through his hair repeatedly. He went to sit down, then stood back up again. “I think I might know,” he finally said in a low, tight voice. “I guess I’d better go find out.”

## Chapter 6

Colette's body disappearing did nothing to quell the national news's thirst for a story. In fact, it fed the flames. More news vans crowded the streets of Tiburon interviewing anyone they could corral. They were so desperately eager, I felt embarrassed for them. It was a very opportunistic way to make a living.

Tuesday morning was more subdued at school. My family's pain was still very much on people's radar, especially with reporters easily visible lurking barely off school property, but there was a new drama to divert people's attention. Liz Thurman was missing.

She had gotten into a fight with her father Sunday night and stormed out of the house saying she was going to go stay with her sister, who was a

student at Ohio State. Her parents assumed she would catch the bus down there, bellyache to her sister, spend the night, and then come on home. The problem was that she never showed up. Her sister hadn't heard from her. And there was no record of her purchasing a bus ticket. She might have paid cash, but so far, no one had stepped forward with any memory of her at all. She had simply disappeared. Her parents were growing increasingly panicked.

A dead great-great aunt was nothing compared to a missing classmate as far as school gossip goes. Everyone had a theory as to where Liz was hiding. The police had interviewed her best friends and her boyfriend, but none of them had a clue.

Unfortunately, the fight Liz had with her father was about her cell phone usage, so she'd stormed out of the house without it. The police couldn't even track her by her calls. It was spooky how easily she had vanished.

"I think she's just hiding somewhere 'cause she's pissed at her dad," Blossom said as we sat in the cafeteria during lunch.

"I don't think disappearing for two days is a good way to get back at your father," I said, munching on a celery stick. I'd been indulging a lot lately and needed to reel in my eating before I ballooned up a pants size. "And besides, where is she? I mean, she hasn't used the credit card her parents gave her for emergencies; she's not at her sister's; I'm sure she wasn't walking around with enough cash to pay for a hotel room for two days. No matter how you look at this, it doesn't sound good."

"Yeah, but this is Tiburon. People just don't disappear from Tiburon," Blossom insisted. I shot her a look, so she quickly amended her statement. "At least not in the last couple of decades."

I did not at all feel comfortable for Liz. And I knew, no matter what Blossom said, that there were weirdos everywhere. A few months earlier, I had been harassed by some scuzzbag in the library parking lot. Things got a little heated, and he let me know without a doubt that he had very bad intentions. Of course, that was until Jessie snatched him off the ground, flew very high into the air, and then let him drop. He caught the creep before he hit the pavement then instructed him to leave town and never

harass any female ever again or he'd be sorry. I was quite sure the scuzzbag took him seriously, but it did prove my point that you always have to be careful, even in a very nice small town with a well-staffed police department.

"So, what are you getting Dreamboat for Christmas?" Blossom asked, helping herself to some of my goldfish crackers.

"Gah ..." I groaned. "I have no idea." The holidays were quickly barreling down on us, and I felt that I could easily panic about the whole gift-giving thing. Jessie's family was extremely wealthy, and it was just ridiculous trying to think of something to buy for a person who had easy access to anything his heart desired. Plus, he'd been on the planet for about ninety-seven or so years, so he'd had plenty of time to indulge his whims. He'd suggested that we put a price cap on our gift giving in consideration of my more limited budget, but I intended to ignore his gallantry—as long as I could think of a really good gift.

"Want to go shopping after school?" Blossom asked, interrupting my thoughts. "I haven't even started on my list."

I shook my head. "Can't. I think we're getting Grandma Gibson out of the hospital this afternoon."

"Your life has been so fun lately," she said, rolling her eyes. "Great grandmother collapsing, dead aunt's body appearing and then disappearing ... Good times."

"Yeah." I had to agree with her. "It's been interesting."

"At least you have a gorgeous boyfriend," Blossom pointed out. "Now, there's a shoulder to cry on. Complete and total yum."

"You should try talking to Fred a little," I told her. "He's got broad shoulders."

"Yeah ... I guess." Blossom turned her head to shoot a speculative look across the cafeteria to where Fred was sitting with a bunch of the other jocks. "I'm just really over the whole jock thing. You know?"

For Blossom to say she was over dating jocks was like Mother Theresa saying she didn't care about feeding the poor of Calcutta. It just felt wrong. "Are you feeling okay?" I asked, lifting my hand to touch her on the forehead. "Are you running a fever?"

"Get off." Blossom brushed my hand away with a laugh. "I just don't feel like I can date a high school boy right now, and I'm not getting involved with some creepy college guy who is too immature to date someone his own age," she insisted. "I just think maybe I need a break from guys in general. Unless," she added, after giving it some thought, "Jessie has a hot brother, and you feel like fixing us up."

"He does," I told her. "But he's twenty-four and kind of a jerk."

Driving home from school, I wished, and not for the first time, that Jessie had a cell phone. I wasn't one of those girls who were always glued to their phone, but it would have been nice to be able to send him a text. Not that he'd get it until after sundown, but still, I was seventeen. I did crave some interaction with my boyfriend beyond his fleeting visits. Plus, I had no idea if he was coming over that evening or not.

Mom came by the house to get me, and we headed to the hospital together. I was hoping for a few minutes alone with Grandma Gibson so I could tell her that Jessie was not responsible for stealing Colette's body. She probably wouldn't believe me, but I was determined to at least tell her. I knew it was ridiculous to want to make my great grandmother actually like my vampire boyfriend, but her approval meant a lot to me, so I had to keep trying.

When we got to the hospital, there were even more reporters than the day before. It was like there was no other news happening in the whole country, and everyone was converging on our tiny town. Fortunately, the staff was ready for us, and we made it up to room 444 without much hassle.

Grandma was ready and waiting for us. She did not like hospitals and was eager to leave. "Are you sure you don't want to stay with us a few days?" Mom asked her.



“You can have my room. I don’t mind the couch,” I assured her.

“No, I don’t want to be a burden,” Grandma Gibson said.

“You wouldn’t be a burden,” Mom insisted, sounding almost angry.  
“You’re my grandmother. This is what families do.”

Grams just smiled and patted her on the hand. “Let’s just get this over with. I think they’re serving creamed corn tonight, and I don’t want to miss it.” I knew for a fact that Grandma Gibson hated creamed corn.

I hated to be selfish, but I was secretly grateful my great grandmother wasn’t coming to stay at our house. I could only imagine what would happen if Jessie came by and she was there. Knowing how feisty she could get, I imagined she might try to stake him with a wooden spoon or something.

All patients have to leave the hospital by wheelchair for some reason, so we rolled Grandma Gibson out the back. Someone must have tipped the reporters off that we were on our way because they swarmed us, shouting questions and shoving microphones in our faces. “Leave us alone, you parasites,” my mother yelled at them, trying to pry open the car door.

Fortunately, the police showed up to inform the parasites that the parking lot was still hospital property and they had to get back. Grandma Gibson appeared to shrink and wither under the glare of the lights and cameras that kept rolling even though the police physically made sure the reporters gave us some space. I felt so bad for her. For almost her entire life she had worried and fretted over the fate of her sister. And now that she finally knew the truth that her sister was dead, now that she could properly mourn, she was being terrorized by the unceasing appetite of the twenty-four-hour news cycle.

As Grandma Gibson got to her feet, her head started wobbling a little, like you see with very old people. I thought she was going to cry, and I was reaching out to support her, but then I noticed there was a fierce look in her eyes. She turned to glare at the reporters. They were all hair sprayed and camera ready, eyes glistening with the hope of a good sound bite. She pointed at the dyed blonde who had accosted me in the lobby. The woman smirked, thinking she’d been singled out for an exclusive. “You will die of

ovarian cancer,” Grandma Gibson told her. “Even now, cells are mutating in your body. You will ignore the symptoms, assuming the disease would never dare touch someone like you. By the time you are diagnosed, it will be too late.”

The smile slid off the reporter’s blandly pretty face.

A man standing next to the blonde gave a small, vicious laugh. Grandma Gibson turned on him next. “You are cheating on your wife, and your mistress has a communicable disease. Your wife will find out the next time she goes to the gynecologist because you have spread it to her. She will divorce you, and your children will never forgive you for all the pain you caused your family. You will die miserable and alone.”

The man’s delighted smile went the way of his competitor’s smirk. “But,” he stammered. “How did ...?”

Grandma Gibson was in no mood to answer his question. She pointed her shaking hand at the next parasite with a microphone and predicted that his lack of acceptance of his gay son would lead to the boy attempting suicide.

The reporters and camera crews all stood there, speechless. The cameras were all rolling, but no one could think of a thing to say. “Come on, Grams,” Mom said, trying to get the old lady in the car. “I think we’d better go.”

But Grandma Gibson had one more thing to tell the stunned mob. She held her head high. She may have been old and feeble, but she was also defiant and had a regal air about her. “Feeding off the pain of others for a living becomes a lot less glamorous when you have to face the tragedies of your own creation. I hope you remember this moment when you must embrace the future suffering in your lives.”

With that, we all got into the car, and mom pulled out of the hospital parking lot. Grandma Gibson let out a loud, satisfied sigh. “I quite enjoyed that,” she said to no one in particular.

Future-predicting grandma was creepy.



## Chapter 7

Getting Grandma Gibson back to Ashtabula Elder Care was surprisingly easy. The police were waiting to do crowd control for our arrival, and the reporters at the hospital didn't follow us. I was expecting chaos, and there was relatively none.

We were both starting to relax as we headed home. Things had been ugly and weird, but it felt like we'd been through the worst of it. There was absolutely no reason for us to expect a renegade camera crew lurking in the bushes outside our home. But after Mom hit the button for the automatic door and we pulled inside, a reporter and cameraman followed us—right into our own damn garage. I couldn't believe it. My first impulse was to leap out and start yelling at them, but Mom said in a very commanding voice, "Stay in the car, Aurora. Keep the doors locked, and don't open the windows."

"What are you doing?" I wanted to know.

"You'll see," she said, a hint of a devilish grin playing across her lips.

"Mrs. Keys? Hi, I'm Ed Reid with News Channel Twelve. I was hoping to ask you a few questions."

Mom ignored him and simply pushed the button to close the garage door, the newsmen still inside. They appeared mildly startled but assumed they were getting an exclusive.

"Who do you think stole Colette Gibson's body?" the reporter asked, tipping his microphone toward the driver's side window.

My mother just sat there, completely ignoring him. I was about to ask her what the hell she was doing. And then I realized she hadn't turned off the car.

"Close the vents," Mom instructed me, reaching for the levers on her side of the dashboard.

The reporter remained completely oblivious for a while. He was either very single minded or not very bright. Possibly both. It took less than a minute for the cameraman to realize what was going on. "Very funny," he said, knocking on the car window. My mom smiled at him and then spread her hands in a shrug.

"Keep rolling," the reporter told him, annoyed that the camera was no longer pointed at him. "They have us in here for a reason."

"Yeah, it's called carbon monoxide poisoning," the other man said. He began hunting around the door that led into the house, searching for the button that would open the garage. But the wiring in our garage was a bit wonky, and the button wasn't where you'd expect.

I was surprised how fast they both started coughing. I couldn't tell if it was the exhaust from the car or just the thought of the exhaust from the car. The cameraman even tried to open the door to our house, but we were too smart for that one. We always kept that door locked.

Mr. Fancy Reporter became indignant. He rapped on the windshield and said, "Do you know who I am? Open that door immediately."

My mom looked at him calmly. "You're a man who forced his way into my home. That's illegal entry." There was something about the steadfast expression on Mom's face that alarmed him; the reporter began flailing at the garage door, not realizing that the emergency cord to open it was dangling from the ceiling just over his head.

The cameraman approached our car, his equipment lowered and a somewhat panicked look on his face. "Would you please open the door? I'm sorry we followed you in, but I'm just doing this for the paycheck. If I had my choice, I'd be working in the movies."

Mom pressed the button and the garage door opened. She had made her point. Both men scurried out onto our driveway. She pressed the button again to close the door as soon as they'd cleared out. "I think most of the fumes got blown out," she said turning off the car. "But let's hurry into the house, just in case."

I would wonder where my mom got her moxy, but I think it was pretty obvious.

We decided on sandwiches and popcorn for dinner. It was just too exhausting thinking about turning on the stove. As we were just finishing up, the phone rang and Mom answered it. Clapping her hand over the receiver, she said, "It's for you. Jessie, I think."

My heart did a loop-de-loop. A thought instantly occurred to me. Jessie had literally never called me on the phone. "Hello?" I said a bit breathlessly, my voice coming out with a bit of a squeak.

"Good evening, Aurora," Jessie said all soft and warm, the melody of his voice tickling my ear. He was so gorgeous that when we were together, it was hard to concentrate on anything but his face. To hear his voice, isolated over the phone, really brought home how beautiful it was, like listening to a perfectly tuned violin.

"Hi," I stammered. I couldn't think of what else to say. It was just so weird to talk to a vampire on the phone. Even one I was madly in love with.

"Would it be all right if I came to see you this evening?" he asked. He paused for a moment and then added, "Something's happened, and I really need to talk to you."

My brain started spinning. For the last few months, Jessie had just appeared outside my bedroom window like a phantom in the night. Now he was calling up and asking, rather formally, to visit. My brain immediately went to a threat rating of orange. What was going on?

"Of course, you can come over," I told him, simultaneously shrugging at my mom from across the room.

"I'll see you shortly," he said before hanging up.

"What was that all about?" Mom wanted to know. "You seem a little tense."

"Oh, I don't know," I told her, trying to force myself to act more casually. "Something's bothering Jessie, and he wants to come over to talk."

“Talk as in ‘we need to talk’ or talk as in, ‘I just need someone to talk to and you’re my girlfriend’ kind of talk?” Mom asked.

“The second one, I think,” I told her, but I could feel a swell of panic building in my stomach anyway. Jessie was always trying to break up with me for my own good. It was a very annoying habit, and the last time he tried, I flat out refused to let him. I appreciated that he had my safety in mind, but sometimes it was a hell of a lot like trying to date Heathcliff from *Wuthering Heights*.

Fortunately, I wasn’t kept waiting and worrying for too long. It was only about ten minutes before the doorbell rang. “My goodness, he must have flown over here,” my mother said.

I was taking a sip of milk at the time and had several seconds of painful coughing. “I don’t think he called from home.” I told her once I could breathe again. The Vanderlind Castle was on the other side of town.

“I thought you said he was the only teenager left in America who didn’t have a cell phone.”

Heading for the door, I said over my shoulder, “There are still a few payphones around, you know. They’re not all in museums.”

I opened the door, both apprehensive and eager. I always wanted to see Jessie, every second of the day, but things had been pretty stressful lately, and I had no idea why he wanted to talk to me.

“Good evening, Aurora,” Jessie said as he crossed the threshold into our home. There was always that moment of hesitation he had before entering. It wasn’t so much reluctance as it was like he was bolstering himself. I didn’t even want to imagine against what.

Jessie had an expression on his face that I didn’t recognize. There was definitely sorrow there, but also something else that I couldn’t put my finger on. Filled with trepidation, I hesitantly reached for his hand. “Hi,” I said. He immediately gave my fingers a reassuring squeeze.

“Good evening, Ms. Keys,” Jessie said, directing his greeting over my shoulder to where Mom sat in the kitchen.

“Hi, Jessie,” Mom said, getting up. “It’s nice to see you again.” She gathered a few papers she had been looking over. “I was just headed into the living room, but help yourself to anything from the fridge.”

“What’s going on?” I asked, once we were seated at the kitchen table and I had provided Jessie with a half-filled glass of orange juice. My mom would think it weird if I didn’t give him at least something to drink.

Jessie sighed, taking my hand again. I tried not to shiver, but his touch always sent tingles through me. “This is so embarrassing,” he began. “And just awful. I mean, truly awful.”

“What?” I asked, starting to sweat a little even though December in Ohio is quite chilly.

In a very low voice, he said, “I know who took Colette’s body.”

“What?” I said, spitting out the word again. “I mean, who? And also, why?”

Running the fingers of his free hand through his hair several times, Jessie finally blurted, “It was my mother.”

“What?” I said for the third, and loudest, time.

“Aurora, would you please stop saying what?” Jessie asked, glancing significantly toward the living room where my mother had gone.

“I will when you stop telling me crazy things,” was my reply. “I’m not sure how else to react.”

“I know. I’m not sure how to react, either,” Jessie said, slumping a little in his chair.

“Did ...” I started and then stopped. In truth, I was horrified. I couldn’t imagine what a vampire would want with a dead body that had been drained of all its blood. It was creepy to the extreme. I tried again. “Did she at least explain to you why she stole it?”

“It was to protect our family,” he said with a deep, soul-deflating sigh. “Mostly me, of course, but all of us, really.”



“Why would she take it, though?” I asked. It didn’t make any sense to me. “What did she think was going to happen?”

Jessie’s brow puckered. “Well, I guess she thought the coroner would figure out that Colette died because of a vampire’s bite. And then the police would start putting two and two together as far as who the reclusive family is that lives in the big fortress down by the river. And then ...”

“The townspeople would grab their torches and pitchforks?” I supplied. I felt the tension releasing from my body like a deflating air mattress. Mrs. Vanderlind stole the body to protect her son. It was a stupid thing to do but also made sense in a weird way. I knew most moms would do anything to protect their children. A vampire mom was probably no different when it came to that unconditional love, no matter how long she’d been a parent.

“I know. She was being an idiot,” Jessie agreed. “But what I wanted your opinion on is ... what do we do now?”

“What do you mean?” I was wondering why he asked me. I didn’t have any experience with body snatching, let alone body returning.

“I mean that Colette is your family. She’s Lily’s sister. What do you think she would want done?” he said, a little exasperated—not just with me, I assumed. “Do we return her? Or do we bury her somewhere? Or what?”

I could tell the whole situation was causing him great pain. It was bad enough that Colette was dead and had been killed by his own kind, but now all this nonsense with her corpse. It was pretty gruesome. “Grandma Gibson would want her to have a proper burial,” I told him. I knew that without a doubt. “So I think you have to bring her back. Is that possible to do without getting caught?”

Jessie nodded. “Very easily. But do we just leave her or give an explanation? How do we handle her reappearance out of nowhere? Do you think if we came up with some kind of explanation it might help get rid of all the media or make it worse?”

I laid my hand to my cheek and gave it some thought. If Colette just magically reappeared, then the mystery continued, and the reporters would stay on in hopes of uncovering the truth. We had to give them something

that made sense but wasn't all that enticing. "I have an idea," I said after a few moments. "I just need to type something up."

Our printer is in my mom's room. It sounds weird, but we have a small house, and that's just the way we've got it set up. Jessie must have made a good impression on my mother because when I told her we were going into her room to use the printer, she only blinked a few times and then said, "Okay, but don't take too long."

Our printer was low on ink. We milk out the end of our ink by taking out the cartridge and shaking it around a bit. It's possible to get a dozen more pages printed that way. As I was messing about with it, Jessie said, "I'm really sorry about this."

I frowned at the cartridge. "It's just a little ink."

"No, you know what I mean," he insisted. "I'm sure you'd prefer a normal boyfriend who was still human and didn't have a mom that snatched bodies out of morgues."

I was crouching by the printer, but his words made me look up at him. He was handsome and brave and rich and generous and had saved my life more times than I liked to think about. But there was more to my love for him than that. The first time I laid eyes on Jessie, I felt something happen inside of me. It was like I had a harp string running through my body and someone had plucked it. I'd known him for over two months, and the string still hadn't stopped vibrating. I had never been a believer in reincarnation before I met Jessie, but I did know that I was somehow connected to him in a way that went beyond high school puppy love.

"Are you kidding?" I asked, getting to my feet, cartridge still in hand. "You think I'd rather be dating some jock so I could go sit in the stands during his games? I'd get plenty of time to play on my cell phone until the whole boring competition was over with. And then there would be some kind of jock party where they chug beer and talk about the game. Hooray!"

Jessie pressed his lips together. "At least you'd be safe," he pointed out.

"But there wouldn't be this," I said, putting my arms around him and tilting my head back. When our lips touched, I could feel an electric charge

through my entire body.

When we finally pulled apart, Jessie gave me a look that was sheer passion. I knew he wasn't still thinking about foisting me off on a non-vampire so I could have a normal life.

Gathering me in his arms like I weighed no more than a dried leaf, Jessie took a few steps toward the bed. It was insane. We were in my mother's room and she was in the house. I knew it was wrong, but my body was begging me not to stop him.

There was a knock at the door. "Everything going all right in there?" Mom asked.

"Yes," I said, answering all too quickly. "Just shaking the ink cartridge. We're almost done."

Jessie let out a quiet chuckle and then whispered to me, "Shaking the ink cartridge. Is that what you call it?"

## Chapter 8

“Missing Corpse a College Prank,” the headline of the Tiburon Sentinel announced the next day. The article began with “The body of Colette Gibson was found back in the Tiburon Morgue early this morning with a letter of explanation. The note read, ‘I thought this would be something funny to do as a fraternity prank, but now I realize that it was very wrong and I apologize. Please accept this money to help with the burial of this poor lady. Taking her was a sick thing to do and I feel really bad.’ With the note was an envelope containing five thousand dollars in cash.” The rest of the article went on to review Colette’s history and recent discovery. Someone who worked in the morgue must have tipped off the local paper so they could get the story first before any of the national reporters.

When I typed the note, I made sure to put on some gloves first. I even pulled a piece of paper from the center of the stack for printing so that there was no chance there were any fingerprints on it. I wasn’t sure if prints could be detected on paper, but I wasn’t taking any chances. Jessie insisted on the part about the money. He figured it was a way to get to help pay for the burial without it being known that it came from him. He believed, and I assumed correctly, that Grandma Gibson would refuse any help from the Vanderlind family. But Grandma Gibson had no money, and Mom couldn’t afford a headstone or anything. I was grateful that Jessie insisted upon the

money. At least this way, Colette would have a nice resting place. She deserved that.

Mom had to take off early in the morning for a mandatory meeting. She worked way too hard for way too little money, but she helped girls who had survived trauma, and it was a pretty damn important job. I was proud of her, so I didn't mind that we couldn't afford to buy a lot of things. It seemed stupid that being in social work meant not getting paid well, but for whatever reason, helping others always seemed to mean making a personal sacrifice. I wasn't sure why.

I was just grabbing some toast before school when the phone rang. I snatched it up, hoping it wasn't something to do with Colette. Our phone number was unlisted, and we had been mercifully spared too many harassing phone calls. "Hello?"

"Is this Aurora?" a woman asked. Her voice was shaky.

I knew it was stupid to give people information over the phone, especially without knowing who they were, so I said, "Who's calling, please?"

"This is Betty Thurman. Liz's mom," was the reply.

"Hi, Mrs. Thurman. This is Aurora," I said immediately.

"Aurora, sweetie, is your mom home?" She sniffed, and I could tell she was fighting back tears.

"No," I told her. "I'm sorry. She had to leave early for some big meeting. Can I give her a message, or is there something I can do to help?"

"Oh, I shouldn't ask you, sweetie. I was really hoping to talk to your mom."

"Go ahead and ask me," I told her, glancing at the clock. I still had a few minutes before I positively had to leave for school. "I can always talk to my mom about it when she's free at work."

I could hear Mrs. Thurman's breathing; it sounded choked and heavy. "Well," she began. "I'm sure you probably know that Liz is missing." I wanted to tell her that I knew and I was sorry, but I didn't want to interrupt.

I felt like at any moment she would shatter. “And I can’t get the police to take things seriously. They keep saying she probably ran away, but Liz wouldn’t do that to me. She might have been mad at her dad, but she wouldn’t go days and days without calling me.”

“Okay,” was all I could think to say. “I believe you.”

“I know your family hasn’t been having an easy time of it lately, but I was wondering ...” She took a ragged breath, trying to keep it together. “Could you or your mom read something in front of the reporters for me? I know you haven’t done any interviews about your grandmother, but this is my only chance to reach people about Liz.”

“Of course, I’ll read something for you,” I told her. “Do you want to email it to me, or do you want me to come by the house?” Screw being late for school; I had to help if I could.

As I was giving Mrs. Thurman my email address, the dam broke for her and she started sobbing. I couldn’t tell if she had it together enough to write down my address correctly, but a few minutes later I got an email with an attachment. Fortunately, we still had enough ink, so I quickly printed it out before heading to school.

There were a couple of news vans outside our house, but I thought there would probably be more prowling around school. When I stopped for red lights, I quickly scanned what Liz’s mom had written. She’d also sent over a photo of Liz. I was grateful we had enough colored ink in the printer for me to print it up.

I pulled into the Tiburon High School lot the same time as Fred. “Hey,” he said, getting out of his car. “Better hustle or we’re going to be late.”

“Yeah, uh ... You go ahead,” I told him, eyeballing the horde of reporters standing just off school grounds.

Fred glanced in their direction and made a face. “Just ignore them,” he said, putting his arm around my shoulder. “In another couple of days, they will all be gone.”

“Actually, I’m going to go talk to them,” I said, although I did appreciate his support.

“What?” Fred was a little incredulous. “I thought you were trying to get everyone to leave your grandma alone.”

“I am,” I assured him. “But Liz’s mom called and asked me to read this.” I waved her statement in the air. “She’s hoping if she gets the word out someone might know what happened to Liz.”

“Oh,” Fred said very quietly. He looked down at his shoes for a moment. Then, with his arm still firmly around me, he changed the direction of his steps, heading toward the news piranhas. “Okay, fine. Let’s get this over with.”

I am not a big fan of public speaking. I hate even giving a presentation at school. But that was nothing compared to facing a pack of hungry reporters. I was so grateful for Fred’s help. I felt really unnerved.

The reporters started rustling around like excited hens as we approached. All cameras were immediately trained upon us. Fred gave my shoulder a squeeze, and then I stepped forward, clearing my throat. “I’d like to read a statement,” I said, before they could all start shouting questions at me. “I’m Aurora Keys,” I began. “Lillian Gibson is my great grandmother.” I felt I adequately had their attention, so I continued. “Colette Gibson’s body has been anonymously returned to the morgue. It turned out it was just a prank. A sick prank, but what are you going to do? At least whoever took her had the decency to return her, and now we can give her a proper burial.” That first part was mostly me. I knew Mrs. Thurman was tunnel focused on finding her daughter, but I thought I had to give the news people a little of what they wanted so they would keep filming. “Colette Gibson disappeared eighty years ago, and her body was only recently found. For decades, her family had to live with the pain of not knowing what happened to her.” And then I added of my own accord, “I speak for my great grandmother when I say it is a special kind of hell to have a missing loved one.” Returning to the script, I read, “And now another girl from our town is missing.” I held up the photo of Liz. “On Sunday evening, Liz Thurman left her house on foot. She was wearing jeans, a red sweater, and a brown coat with faux fur trim. She said she was heading for the bus station, but that was the last that anyone heard from her. There is a ten-thousand-dollar reward for any information that leads to the discovery of Liz Thurman. Please, her family

is frantic. If you know anything, please contact the Tiburon, Ohio, police department.” That was the end of what Mrs. Thurman had written, but for some reason I felt compelled to add, “Liz, if you can hear this, your family loves you very much, and they are doing everything they can to find you.” That was all I had to say, but the cameras kept rolling. “Okay, thanks,” I mumbled. “That’s it.”

“Wow,” said Fred as we headed into the school. “You did great,” he told me. “I wasn’t really thinking about it too much before, but I’m really kind of worried for Liz.”

“Yeah, me too,” I had to admit. “It’s not looking good.”

We did not get in trouble for being tardy. I showed the teacher patrolling the hall the statement and explained what I had just done, and we were allowed to simply head to our homerooms. I guess some kids must have seen the reporters filming, or maybe Fred told a few friends because within an hour, everyone in the school knew about it. I was already tired of being the center of weird gossip, but I knew that leveraging the reporters who were there to feast off Grandma Gibson’s pain was the right thing to do. I just had to suck it up for a while.

“Hey,” Don Updike said to me as he passed me in the hall after second period. I steeled myself for something obnoxious, but he actually said, “That was really cool what you did for Liz with those reporters. Maybe it’ll help find her.”

“Thanks. I hope so,” I told him. I didn’t know why I’d thanked him, but I really wasn’t expecting him to be nice to me.

“Sorry about the mummy jokes,” Don said in a much lower voice. “I wasn’t thinking about how there are still people alive that would be upset. It was kind of a tool thing to do.”

“Um, yeah, okay,” I replied. At first I was literally too stunned to string anything coherent together. Forcing myself to focus, I said, “I appreciate you saying that.”

Don shrugged and headed off down the hall.



“What was that all about?” Blossom asked, walking up to me.

“Don just apologized for being a jerk,” I said, still a bit off kilter from the rarity of the whole thing.

“You’re kidding.” Blossom turned to look at the retreating boy. “Wow. I always think of him as such a little worm. Maybe he’s not so bad, after all.”

“Maybe,” I said. My mom was always telling me that people are more complex than you think, and I guess she was right.

“Any chance you’re free after school to do some Christmas shopping?” Blossom asked as we both started walking to our next classes. “The whole Liz thing is really getting to me. I’m not feeling festive at all, and it’s really getting me down.”

“Let me just double check that Joe doesn’t need me.” I worked at a cafe called Cup of Joe’s, and my boss was being really understanding about my family’s bizarre disaster. For the last couple of days, he actually didn’t want me coming into work because there were too many news people hanging around, warming up, and getting a cup of coffee. He knew that having me trapped behind the counter where anyone could ask me anything under the guise of ordering a latte would be pretty hellish.

It is against school policy to use a cell phone during school hours unless it’s an extreme emergency. It was a really good way to get your phone confiscated. Still, kids did it, and the best way was to either go outside or have a friend cover for you. Blossom acted as my human shield while I quickly pulled up Cup of Joe’s number.

“I still don’t think it’s a good idea,” Joe said in a guarded voice, once I got him on the phone.

He sounded so awkward, I felt compelled to ask, “Is there a reporter standing in front of you right now?”

“You could say something like that,” was his reply.

“Okay, well ... Just text me when you think I can come back to work,” I told him. I was annoyed, but not with Joe, of course. He was just looking out for me. The truth was that I really needed the money I got from my part-

time gig as coffee servant. Especially with Christmas breathing down my neck. I was hoping to have a bit of surplus cash to try to figure out a really good gift for the vampire who had everything.

With my schedule free and clear, we headed for the mall as soon as we were done with classes. I always think it's hilarious that stores will have red and green decorations everywhere and they'll be blasting Christmas music, but they make sure their employees say "Happy holidays," like they're actually trying to be considerate of people who don't celebrate Christmas. Nobody is fooled.

Even with the fake holiday sincerity, it did make me feel a little more festive seeing little kids lining up with their parents to talk to Santa and everything. I got a down vest for my mom and some tarot cards for Grandma Gibson. If she was going to predict the future, she might as well have the proper equipment. Then Blossom and I bought each other earrings because we each found a pair that we loved, so why not? My dad usually didn't even bother to call on Christmas, so I didn't get him anything. That just left Jessie. Blossom suggested hot chocolate at the food court, and I figured as long as I didn't get any whipped cream, I was doing okay as far as reeling in the calorie consumption. Blossom, of course, got whipped cream, sprinkles, and a peppermint swizzle. What I wouldn't give to have her metabolism.

"So, not to sound like a dork or anything, but I'm proud of you for making that announcement about Liz," Blossom said as she made short work of her whipped cream. "I mean, I know you were probably really embarrassed, but maybe it'll help."

"Actually, once I started talking, it wasn't so bad," I told her.

"What do you think happened to her?" Blossom asked, her eyes a bit wide. "I mean, do you think, like, someone kidnapped her or killed her or something?"

I shrugged, feeling my Christmas cheer quickly draining away. "It's not looking too good. I mean, there's still a chance she's okay, just being an idiot, but probably something bad has happened."

“It’s so weird that they found the only person to go missing from Tiburon in the last century almost exactly to the day when a new girl disappeared. I wonder if she’ll show up, like fifty years from now, all drained of blood and everything.”

I shivered. “I hope not.”

Blossom warmed to the idea. “Maybe there’s a vampire that lives in Tiburon, and he only has to feed every couple of decades?”

“Blossom, can we please not talk about this?” I said in an overly loud voice. A couple of people sitting at nearby tables glanced in our direction.

“Calm down. I was just kidding,” she told me.

“I know, but you didn’t have to see the body,” I said. “It was horrible. I mean, you could tell when she died she was absolutely terrified.”

“Sorry,” Blossom said. “I wasn’t thinking that it was actually true or anything. I didn’t mean to freak you out.”

“Forget about it,” I grumbled. Then, to change the subject, I said, “Who do you have left on your list?”

“My grandpa and my dad. If I get them done, then I think that about covers it.”

“What do you think you’re getting your dad for Christmas?”

“A tie.” She thought about it a bit more. “Maybe a sweater vest. Or some type of hat that he would never wear in a million years.”

I wasn’t going to get sucked into a conversation about why Blossom would want to knowingly give her dad a gift he wouldn’t like, so I said, “What about your grandpa?”

Blossom made a face. “I don’t know. He’s impossible to shop for. I mean, what do you buy for a man pushing ninety?”

She had me there. I had to confess, “I have no idea.”



## Chapter 9

“What do you usually do for Christmas?” I asked Jessie. We were snuggled on the couch in the living room. His head was in my lap, cradled by a pillow; his eyes were closed.

“A big roast. Most people have turkey, but we always have rack of lamb. Mashed potatoes and freshly baked bread. Cranberry sauce and mulled wine. Every type of pie you can imagine and peppermint sticks decorating the tree.”

Jessie’s eyes were still closed, but a contented smile crossed his face. I had to wonder if he was talking about what his family did last Christmas. It seemed unlikely. He continued. “Then there’s caroling and bringing baskets of food to the poor. Grandfather is pretty tight fisted, but for Christmas, he usually opens his purse strings and can actually be quite generous.”

That’s when I knew he was talking about his memories of Christmas back before he was turned into a vampire. Jessie’s grandfather was the first vampire in his family. He had ruthlessly turned his children and then his grandchildren. Jessie’s mother had tried to protect her children, even after she had been turned, but she’d only managed to spare the youngest—a daughter who had lived to a ripe old age.

The grandfather had been lost at sea, quite literally. As the Vanderlind family was taking a ship to move to America, the old bastard was discovered feasting on a cabin boy. The other passengers threw him overboard in the middle of the Atlantic. He was never heard from again. When Jessie told me the story, I was shocked that the whole family hadn’t been discovered. That’s when Jessie explained that his mother had been the

one to send the boy to her father's cabin. She had planned the whole thing to get rid of her father. The cabin boy had lived and discovered, upon his arrival in America, that a distant relative had died and left him some money. It still probably didn't erase the trauma the boy suffered from almost being drained by a vampire, but it was nice of the Vanderlinds to compensate him for his unwitting participation in ridding the family of their brutal patriarch.

"That really sounds wonderful," I said once Jessie had stopped reminiscing about holidays he hadn't seen in almost a century. "Did any of your traditions survive here in America?"

Sighing, Jessie said, "A few. We still give to the poor. Or at least, I make sure we do. Daniel has inherited Grandfather's miserly ways when it comes to spending money on others. Not when it comes to himself, of course."

"What will you do this Christmas?"

"I was hoping to come over here and spend it with you," he told me. "Isn't that what modern boyfriends do?"

If I was being honest, I wasn't sure. Besides Jessie, I'd only ever dated Fred, and that hadn't been during any significant holidays. I didn't know what was expected. "I would love it if you came over for Christmas," I told him. "We don't do that much in the evening, so that would be perfect." We always had Grandma Gibson over for a meal, but we ate early so she would be gone by the time Jessie climbed out of his coffin.

With a little embarrassed grin, Jessie said, "And if you're free, my mom would like to know if you would join us Christmas Eve."

"She ... what?" I stammered. "I mean, where?"

"At our home, of course," he said, as if visiting a castle full of vampires on Christmas Eve was the most commonplace thing in the world. The family had literally moved their ancestral home from Hungary to Ohio, so it was a legitimate castle.

"Jessie, not to be rude or anything because I appreciate the invitation, but what exactly would we be doing?"

This gave Jessie pause. “I’m not exactly sure,” he said. “But I think after our trip to Budapest, she’s worried that it’ll look bad if you aren’t part of our holiday in some fashion.”

The invitation made sense. Over Thanksgiving, Jessie and I were forced to fly to Budapest to defend Jessie’s having staked a fellow vampire to protect me. We’d tried to convince the Bishops that I was the reincarnation of Colette Gibson and therefore Jessie had no choice. The Bishops were the world’s oldest vampire family. They functioned as a ruling body for the undead. They didn’t exactly find us not guilty. They’d actually decided that I was to be turned into a vampire. Fortunately, my undead sentence wouldn’t have to be carried out until I was twenty-four. Jessie was thrilled with the ruling but not because he wanted me to be a vampire. He said that the Bishops would probably forget about the ruling for a few decades, and by the time they remembered, I would be in my sixties. Plus, through a fake passport and some role playing, we had led them to believe my name was Colette, so that would help with concealing me.

Spending eternity with Jessie sounded like a dream, but the whole idea of dying and then being brought back and having to drink human blood to live kind of freaked me out. As it was, Jessie’s breath always smelled slightly of pennies. I was pretty good at never allowing my brain to think about why. Plus, Jessie was fearful that if I was changed into a vampire, it would alter who I am. I guess you don’t always wake up the same person after being altered. Supposedly, it can really warp some people. I was willing to believe that. There seemed to be a lot of jerky vampires around.

“I usually spend Christmas Eve at Blossom’s house,” I told him. “For the past couple of years, she’s had a party. But I could probably go over early to help her set up, then head over to your place once the party gets started.”

“That’s sounds like it will work.”

“Or,” I added, suddenly feeling shy. “Maybe you could come with me to the party.”

“Um ... That could be problematic,” he said. “I really don’t think I should start going into your friend’s homes. The fact that I’m here is bad

enough.”

“Sure. I understand,” I told him. I just didn’t know if Blossom would. Now that the cat was out of the bag that I had a boyfriend, she would expect me to bring him around.

Thinking about Blossom reminded me of our conversation at the mall. “Do you know about Liz Thurman?” I asked.

“The girl who’s missing?”

“Yeah, that’s her,” I said. Jessie wasn’t as out of touch with the town as I’d expected. “This is going to sound weird, but what do you think happened to her?”

“What do you mean?” Jessie asked, looking up at me.

“It’s just this thing Blossom said at the mall today. She said it was strange that the day Tiburon’s only missing person was discovered, another girl disappeared.” I immediately regretted bringing the whole thing up because I suddenly realized what I said sounded a little bit like an accusation.

Jessie sat up and gave me a concerned look. “Do you think a vampire took her?” he asked.

“No,” I said, reaching for his hand. “I didn’t mean it like that. But it’s definitely weird. Don’t you think? I mean, where the hell did she go? Her family is totally freaked.”

Jessie nodded, his face very solemn. “What’s her address? I’ll look around, see if I can pick up on anything.”

“Would you?” I said, giving him a squeeze. “That would be great. I’m really worried for her.”

“I’d do anything for you,” he said with a smile, his gray eyes twinkling.

There was a loud thump, like someone had taken a kick at our front door. “What’s that?” I said, a bit startled.

“Let’s go see,” Jessie said, quickly getting to his feet but keeping hold of my hand.



My mom showed up at the front door the same time we did. "I guess you heard it, too," she said, pulling back the curtain to peek out the front window. "It sounded like something hit the house." Mom had taught me that you never go charging outside when you hear a weird noise. You check things out from the safety of your home to make sure no one is trying to lure you outside with the sound of a crying baby or something like that. Being a social worker had made her pretty wise to a lot of the tricks creepy guys use. She didn't raise me to be paranoid, but she did raise me to be smart. And part of being smart is using common sense caution. "There's something on the porch," she said. Then wrinkling her nose, she added, "It's furry."

"I'll check on it," Jessie said. He moved so quickly out the door, pulling it closed behind him, that my mom didn't have time to protest.

Mom and I stood there looking at each other for a couple of seconds, and then Mom opened the door. There were three of us, after all. It wasn't like just one of us was home alone or anything. "What is it?" Mom asked as she swung the door open.

Jessie hid the thing slightly behind his back. "It's a rabbit," he said. When both of us gasped and made to help the poor creature, he quickly added, "It's dead. I think maybe it got hit by a car."

"But why is it on our porch?" Mom wanted to know. We didn't have a huge front lawn, but even if the poor bunny had somehow gotten tangled under a wheel and thrown, it's unlikely that it would have made it all the way to our porch.

"I think maybe someone tossed it up here," he said. "Probably just some kids being jerks or something. I bet they don't even know who lives here, just tossed it at the closest house." Jessie still wouldn't show us the rabbit. "I'll take care of burying it. We have a little pet cemetery to the side of our yard. It'll be much nicer than having the street cleaner get him."

"That's so nice of you, Jessie," my mom said. "Do you want a bag or something?"

"Um, sure," was his reply. "A plastic bag would be appreciated."

“I’ll get it for you,” Mom said, hurrying to the kitchen.

“Aurora,” Jessie said in a harsh whisper as soon as Mom was out of earshot. “Once I’m gone, you need to lock all the doors and windows. Don’t invite anybody in no matter what.”

“Why?” I asked. Throwing a dead rabbit at someone’s house was a crappy thing to do, but it wasn’t exactly life threatening.

“This rabbit’s been drained,” Jessie said, his voice tight with anger. “There’s no blood left. It’s like a deflated balloon.”

My own blood froze in my veins. Either we were the victims of a practical joke by a demented taxidermist or we’d just received a calling card from a vampire.

## Chapter 10

There are things most teenage girls really need to hear. Obvious things like *don't text while driving*. Or *don't blow off your friends just because you're dating some guy*. Or, advice that I could have benefited from, *don't date a vampire*. Because even though Jessie had never even come close to hurting me, and even though he was one of the nicest and most generous people on the planet, and even though he wasn't one of those jealous control-freak vampires that you're always reading about in romance novels, he was still a vampire. Which meant he had vampire friends. And vampire enemies. So I was constantly under threat from this or that member of the undead whom I wasn't even dating.

I knew this wasn't Jessie's fault. None of it was his fault. But still, the dehydrated bunny made it pretty clear that there was a new vampire in town looking to drain me, and I was freaked. I stood there for a second after he'd explained to me about the rabbit and then just slammed the door.

Mom appeared a few moments later proffering a plastic bag. "Doesn't he need this?" she asked, a little confused.

"He remembered he had one in his car," I managed to choke out in a short little hyperventilating type breath.

"Are you all right?" she asked, instantly going into mom mode.

I shook my head. "No," I told her.

"Oh, sweetie," she said, putting arms around me. "It was just some sick practical joke. I'm sure it has nothing to do with us personally."

I nodded this time, desperately wanting to believe her. If only the rabbit had been struck by a car. No fun for the poor bunny, either way, but it would have been a little less terrifying for me. As soon as I regained my composure, I went and checked every window and door in the house. We were snug as a bug, but I still felt vulnerable. “Mom,” I said, seeking her out in the living room. “I know that this whole rabbit thing was probably random, but let’s just try to be a little extra careful for a while. Just in case.”

“Aren’t you always careful?” Mom asked, giving me a thoughtful frown.

“Of course,” I insisted. “But who knows? Maybe it’s like the weird, angry ex-boyfriend of one of your clients. Or maybe it’s just some random stalker that’s mad because one of us didn’t give him the time of day.” I laid my hand to my cheek as a new thought occurred to me. “Or maybe it’s Dad trying to win you back.”

“What?” Mom tried to get a look at my pupils. “Did you hit your head recently?”

“Sorry.” I broke out into a laugh. “I was suddenly feeling really melodramatic.” We both chuckled a little. “But seriously, let’s be extra, extra careful for a while. No inviting strangers into the house to use the phone. Nothing like that.”

Mom laughed some more. “Sweetie, I wouldn’t do that anyway.”

I had a horrible night’s sleep. Obviously. I doubt I drifted off for more than ten minutes at a time. I had thought since being found not guilty by the Bishops when we were in Budapest that I was safe from attack from other bloodsuckers. At least until I was twenty-four. The Bishops had ruled that I was to be accorded the same respect and benefits as if I had already been turned. I didn’t exactly know what those benefits were, but I was pretty sure it entailed not throwing dead rabbits at my front door. The vampires had a pretty strong social network. You’d think that everyone with fangs would know I wasn’t to be touched.

I decided to focus on other things so I didn't drive myself crazy. Like the fact that there were only six shopping days left until Christmas. I was starting to panic about Jessie. He was simply impossible to shop for. If I waited much longer, I was going to end up just getting him a sweater or something lame. It was almost like I had stage fright about buying him a gift. I didn't even want to think about what he would give me. I was glad he'd suggested the price cap for presents. Otherwise, he'd probably give me something ridiculously expensive that I could never wear in a million years for fear that my mom would discover its true value and ask me what the heck was going on. He'd already given me enough jewelry to pay for my college education. I had a giant diamond engagement ring that we used as a prop for our trip to Budapest and he refused to take back when I tried to return it. And also a gorgeous Lalique moonstone necklace that probably belonged in a museum. Plus my Pools of Light crystal pendant, of course, but there was no way I was taking that off my neck. Thinking about Jessie's gifts made me feel even more insecure about buying him something. I had to get my creative shopping juices flowing.

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School was buzzing with an update about Liz. Mrs. Thurman was orchestrating a door-to-door hunt for her daughter, and she was asking for volunteers. It sounded kind of nuts because there were close to ten thousand houses in Tiburon, not including the surrounding countryside, but she was determined to do it. After all, it wasn't that long ago when it was discovered that three women were being held prisoner in a house in Cleveland. All of them lived in the same neighborhood as their captor. I guess Mrs. Thurman figured that whoever took her daughter might be nearby.

"Let's volunteer for the Liz search," Blossom said, finding me at my locker before first period. "They're going to need a lot of people."

"Sure," I said with a shrug. I was all for helping any way that I could.

"Okay, good. Because I already signed you up," Blossom told me. When I started to protest with something about wanting to make my own decisions in life, she cut me off saying, "Well, I knew you'd want to help,

and there was a bunch of kids lined up to volunteer, so I thought I'd save you the hassle of standing in line."

"Gee, thanks," I grumbled.

"You're welcome," she said, giving me a smug smirk. "I know you too well."

I had to admit, she really did.

"Do you think Dreamboat will want to help?" she wanted to know. "I almost put his name down, too, but figured maybe I should ask first."

"I don't know," I told her. "I'll ask him later." It occurred to me that I hadn't given Jessie Liz's address the previous night so that he could look around for clues as to what happened to her. Vampires have an incredible sense of smell. Maybe he could pick up her trail or something. If he was a normal seventeen-year-old, I could have just texted it to him.

And then inspiration struck. I knew what I was going to get Jessie for Christmas. It was going to cost me an arm and a leg, but I knew for a fact he didn't have one. Then I paused for a moment with my hand to my cheek. Obviously, I was getting Jessie a cell phone. But was getting him a phone kind of like when a man gets a woman lingerie? As far as she's concerned, it's not comfortable; it has limited use outside the bedroom; and she doesn't particularly want it. Or if she does, it's only to please her man. I wasn't sure how comfortable Jessie would be with a cell phone, and it only had limited use for him because there was no reception in the Vanderlind Castle. If I got him a cell, would it be solely because I wanted him to have it? Was it really something for him? I took another moment to give it some good, hard thought and then decided the hell with it; I was going to get him one anyway. Isn't that what men usually did with lingerie?

During lunch, I told Blossom my brilliant gift idea. "Dreamboat doesn't have a cell phone?" she asked, making a face. "What century is he living in?"

I choked a little on my sandwich. "It's just there's no cell reception at his house, so he never bothered," I told her after I'd stopped coughing.

“It’s still a little weird,” she informed me. “Even if he can’t get reception in that big bunker where he lives.” A thought occurred to her, and her eyes widened for a second before becoming sly. “Hey, when you do the search of the castle, can I come with you?”

“What?” I stammered, coughing a little. If Blossom was going to keep surprising me while I was eating, I hoped she was familiar with the Heimlich maneuver.

“Well, if we’re going to be searching every house, that includes the crazy castle down by the river, doesn’t it?” she asked. “I mean, I know that’s the first place I’d want to look if someone I loved disappeared.”

“Oh, come on,” I said, rolling my eyes even though my stomach was suddenly in knots. “Don’t you think that’s a little Vincent-Price-late-night-movie obvious? Hey, let’s all grab our pitchforks and head over to the castle.”

Blossom shrugged as she dragged a soggy cafeteria french fry through a splash of ketchup. “I guess.” After she popped the fry in her mouth, she added, “But seriously. If they’re going to search the castle, then I want in.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I asked. I could feel my face scrunching with anger and a bit of alarm for Jessie and his family. I tried to fight it. There was no reason to overreact. The villagers weren’t hammering on the castle door. At least, not yet. “Why would they search the castle?”

“Isn’t that what we’re doing?” she said, raising her well-groomed eyebrows. “Going door-to-door, making sure no one has a secret dungeon or anything.”

The Vanderlinds did have a dungeon. I knew that for a fact because I had to spend the night there once, for my own protection. Of course, I had the key locked inside with me. Which was a good thing because at least one vampire had wanted to get into my cell for a snack. Blossom had been there, too. Fortunately, she didn’t remember because she was passed out for our whole stay.

“Blossom, you know that nobody is searching anybody’s house, right?” I said before she got too excited. “They’re probably just going to have us

hand out flyers and maybe ask people if they know anything. You can't search someone's home to make sure they're not a criminal. You have to have a warrant and just cause and all that stuff. People have a right to privacy."

"I guess," she said, sounding a little disappointed. "So ..." she said, giving me a penetrating look. "Do the Vanderlinds have a secret dungeon?"

"A secret one?" I said, squinting a little and putting a hand to my cheek as if I was thinking about it. "No, not a *secret* one."

"Do they really have a dungeon?" Blossom asked, leaning forward, eager for some dirt. She was obviously terribly intrigued.

"Sure." I nodded a few times. "There's a dungeon and a moat and a few of those, whatcha' call 'em? The big hole where they throw people and then the bars go over the top." It was obvious Blossom had no idea what I was talking about, but the word was on the tip of my tongue. There was one in the movie *Labyrinth*, after all. I became obsessed with that movie right at the tail end of my unicorn phase. "Um ... oubliette. That's it. They've also got an oubliette."

She gave me a flat look. "Be serious."

"Blossom. You've been in the castle, too, you know. You've seen it. Everything's been all modernized with electricity and running water and all that good stuff. If they had something that used to be a dungeon then it's been converted into a rec room or a wine cellar or whatever."

"That's too bad." Blossom was disappointed. "If there was still a dungeon, then you could play the captive and the princess. Or maybe prisoner and prison matron." She waggled her eyebrows at me.

"What, like blast him with a hose and throw delousing powder at him or something?" I made a face. "Yeah, that is so not sexy."

There was a meeting after school for the Liz search party volunteers. A ton of kids showed up. Including a bunch of people I wouldn't have



expected, like most of the football team and Don Updike. I was almost starting to think he had a heart.

It turned out I was right about the door-to-door. It was just handing out flyers and talking to people, asking if they'd seen or heard anything, telling them to call the police department if they thought of anything or heard anything, and pointing out that there was a ten-thousand-dollar reward for any information that led to Liz's recovery.

Liz's older sister, Brenda, was there. I guess she'd taken some time off from college, but what was she supposed to do? I doubt she could have concentrated on her classes. She had been a cheerleader and a member of the student council when she was at Tiburon two years ago, so she still knew a few of the kids. The Thurmans had divided Tiburon into sections. All volunteers were assigned a section and given a map, plus a form to fill out for each person they talked to, etc.... "Stay in groups of two or more," Mrs. Thurman instructed us. "And do not stay out past eight o'clock at night." She was very adamant that we should take our safety seriously. There was a good chance there was a psychopath out there, after all.

"Yeah, I'd like to see some psycho try to take me down," Jimmy Stevens said, thumping his beefy chest. A lot of guys grunted in agreement and jostled each other in what they must have assumed was a manly way.

I couldn't help but glance over at Blossom. She rolled her eyes. "I'm not responsible for him," she told me. Jimmy was Blossom's ex-boyfriend, and he was a bit of a lunkhead. The fact that he thought just because he could bench press a lot of weight and had watched some action movies meant he had nothing to fear made me chuckle to myself. Jimmy obviously had no idea what was really out there in the dark.

"Let's do our houses right away," I said to Blossom, a chill running up my spine. The meeting was breaking up, and people were headed for the school's parking lot. I definitely didn't want to be out once night started to fall. I hadn't exactly forgotten about the poor dead bunny from the night before, more just blocked it out for most of the day.

"Shouldn't we wait until people have a chance to get home from work?" she asked.

Her suggestion made sense, but it got dark early in Ohio in the middle of December. “Yeah, but I’ve got a ton of things to do, and I’m meeting Jessie later,” I told her.

“Okay.” She wasn’t going to be too stubborn about it. “So when do I get to hang out with Dreamboat, anyway?”

“Well, first of all, when you stop calling him Dreamboat. That would be totally embarrassing.”

She let out a little snort. “Oh, come on, Aurora. He owns a mirror, doesn’t he? The guy’s got to know he’s gorgeous.”

I wondered; did Jessie realize he was beyond good looking? “I don’t know,” I had to admit. “He’s never brought it up.”

## Chapter 11

It was actually pretty weird walking up to a house, ringing the bell, and then asking the person that lived there if they knew anything about a missing teenage girl. There was something accusatory about it, even if we weren't directly accusing anyone of anything. It was interesting to see how the different people we talked to reacted.

A woman in her sixties wearing a house coat and slippers declared, "Oh, I heard about that. Isn't it horrible?" She said it like it was some scary plot twist in a Gothic horror movie that she wanted to relish. "What do you think happened to that poor girl? It's been days and days now. Her parents must be worried sick." She was wearing bright red lipstick, and I could tell by the way her top lip was creased with numerous vertical lines that she was a smoker. I could visualize the ashtrays in her home piled high with butts, each with a crimson ring around the filtered end.

"Um ... yeah," Blossom said. "Of course, they're worried sick. That's why we're here." She thrust a flyer that had Liz's picture on it toward the woman.

"Is that her?" the woman asked, looking over the flyer.

“Of course that’s her,” Blossom snapped. “Why would they put another girl’s photo on a missing person’s flyer?” It was obvious from Blossom’s tone that she thought the woman was intentionally being stupid, but I knew she was just trying to enjoy a bit of gossip.

“There’s a ten-thousand-dollar reward for anyone who helps find Liz,” I said, cutting Blossom off from making any more snarky remarks. Our goal was to help Liz, not point out when people were being idiots. “All the information’s on there,” I added, pointing it out to make it extra obvious. “So please, if you hear of anything or think of anything that might help, call that number right away.”

“I definitely will,” the woman said. “Especially if it means getting ten thousand dollars.”

“It’s not a lottery,” Blossom growled.

“Thank you so much for talking to us,” I said with a fake smile plastered on my face as I ushered my best friend off the porch. As soon as the woman’s door was closed, I said, “Blossom, you’re not helping Liz by getting in an argument with people.”

“I know,” she agreed. “But that old biddy was really annoying. I mean, how stupid can you get? Is that her photo on the missing person’s flyer? I mean, seriously. I feel like she was intentionally being stupid.”

“Let’s just try to cover as many houses as we can before six o’clock,” I said, glancing at my watch. It was already a quarter to five, and the sky would soon be thinking about growing dark.

“Fine, let me just fill this out,” Blossom said, looking at the form. She shot me a look. “Anything suspicious?”

“No,” I said. “I didn’t think so.”

“Fine. I’ll just write nosey old biddy,” Blossom told me. “Is biddy spelled with a t or a d?”

“Blossom, let’s try to focus on helping Liz. We’re not supposed to be commenting on people’s personalities or anything.”

“Fine,” she told me, finishing up the form. “Let’s move on.”

The next house looked a little worn at the heels. There were random automotive parts strewn about the lawn, and the front gate dragged across the walk as we opened it. We'd barely gotten through the gate when the front door banged open and a man charged out onto the porch. "No solicitors! What do you want?" he demanded. The man was clad only in sweatpants and a tank top that was doing a poor job of covering his massive belly. It was definitely too cold to be only wearing a tank top.

We both stood there frozen for a second, not sure what to do. Eventually, I found the ability to say "We're here handing out flyers about Liz Thurman." My voice came out a good half an octave higher than usual, but I pushed forward, anyway. "She's a Tiburon resident, and she disappeared Sunday evening."

"Well, I didn't take her," the man said, sounding annoyed and a bit defensive.

I really didn't know how to respond to his remark, so I ignored it and said, "We're going door-to-door to make people aware that she's missing and ask them if they've heard anything." I edged forward and held out a flyer.

The man looked at me suspiciously for a moment but then finally snatched the flyer out of my hand. Glancing at it only briefly, he said, "I didn't hear nothing."

"Okay, well thank you for talking to us, and if you remember anything or hear anything suspicious, you can call that number on the flyer," I said, turning to get back on the other side of his fence as quickly as possible. The man gave me the creeps.

"That's a photo of her," Blossom felt the need to add, just in case the guy couldn't figure it out, "and there's a ten-thousand-dollar reward for anyone with information that leads to Liz's return."

The man made a disgusting little humph, blowing air out his nose. "That's not the kind of thing you should do for money," he grumbled while pulling his front door shut.

Blossom stood on the sidewalk, scanning his house. “Let’s sneak around back and see if any of his windows are boarded up,” she said. Her gaze fell to the foundation. “Do you think this house has a basement?”

“Do you really think the biddy next store doesn’t keep an eagle eye on everything he does?” I asked. She struck me as a nosey neighbor.

“Yeah, you’re probably right,” Blossom had to agree. “I’ll just write angry and defensive.”

“Just put down that we talked to him and gave him a flyer.”

By six o’clock, it was dark out and we’d only covered about half our houses. “Let’s call it a night,” I said. “I’m beat.” And a little bit nervous about being out after dark.

“Yeah, I’m starving, and my feet are killing me,” Blossom said. She’d worn very cute, but not practical, boots.

We’d consolidated cars before starting out, so I drove Blossom home in my ancient gold VW bug and waited for her to get in the house safely before I took off again. The snow, which had been coming down on and off all day like sprinkled powdered sugar, began to clump into larger flakes. I knew the temperature was dropping because I could see my breath even with the VW’s heater limping along. I stopped at a light and took a moment to enjoy how pretty snow dancing across a windshield can be. It was too early in winter for me to be sick of it yet.

It was one of those odd moments when the snow serves as kind of a muffler and everything is still. Mine was the only car at the light, which was an anomaly even for a small place like Tiburon. I relaxed a little, just trying to feel the quiet.

Out of the corner of my eye something caught my attention. I snapped my head around to get a better look, but nothing was there. Just the snow building up in people’s yards. The light turned green and I stepped on the gas, no longer making any attempt to enjoy the quiet beauty of snowfall. It was probably just my imagination, but for the briefest of seconds I thought I saw an old man in a long, dark coat standing by a tree and scowling at me.

There was a message on my cell that my mom would be home late, so I made myself a peanut butter and jelly sandwich and drank a tall glass of milk. When the phone rang around seven-thirty, I snatched it up. "Hello?" I said, a bit breathlessly.

"Miss Aurora Keys, please," said a warm, smooth voice.

"Jessie, it's me," I said, stifling a giggle at his formality.

"Sorry," was his response. "I didn't recognize your voice for some reason. Are you all right?"

"I'm fine," I assured him. "I've just been outside for most of the evening."

"Perhaps that's it."

After a moment's hesitation, I said, "My mom's not home right now. Do you want to come over?"

I heard an amused chuckle, and then he said in his warm honey voice, "I'll be right there."

When a vampire says something like "I'll be right there," he means it literally. Vampires can move pretty fast when they want to. It was maybe two or three minutes later when I heard him knocking at the door. "Good evening," Jessie said, stepping over the threshold like a man trying to deftly avoid an unpleasant stain on the sidewalk. He came right up next to me, bent his head, and kissed me. If I had still been chilly from my few hours of pounding the pavement, his cool lips would have warmed me right up.

"And what have you been doing this evening that you spent hours outside in the chilly weather?"

"A bunch of Tiburon students have been going door-to-door handing out flyers to try to find Liz," I murmured, leaning into him, still dizzy from his kiss.

"Ah, the missing girl," Jessie said, his lips pulling slightly down at the corners. He gently righted me and then ran his hand through his hair a few

times. “I realized when I laid down this morning that I forgot to get her address. I apologize, but the rabbit distracted me.”

“Yeah, it pretty much distracted all of us,” I told him. “Did you figure anything out?” I asked. “Was it a vampire that drained that poor bunny?”

“I’m pretty sure it was,” he told me with a solemn face. “But my mother informed me that a large party of vampires just passed through Ohio on their way to New York. She feels it was probably someone being spiteful. Kind of like egging the house of someone you don’t like.”

“Oh ... okay,” I said. That made me feel a little better. Not great, but better. I guess there were plenty of the undead out there who didn’t approve of Jessie and me. Most vampires felt that being with a human on an equal level was beneath them. But as long as they kept their spite limited to cruel pranks, then I guess I could accept that.

“Has there been any news? Any updates about the girl’s disappearance?” Jessie asked, interrupting my thoughts.

I shook my head. “Not that I know of. Not that anyone is talking about.”

“Hmmm.” He undid the buttons on his long coat. “That does sound very bad.”

“What’s it like to fly in the snow?” I asked as I took the coat from him. The cold still clung to it.

Jessie squinted his eyes a little as he gave it some thought. “It depends on the snow and how fast you’re going. Sometimes it feels like in the movies when a spaceship makes the jump to hyperspace.” Jessie smiled at me as a new thought occurred to him. “Why don’t you get the missing girl’s address, bundle up, and then you can find out for yourself?”

He didn’t have to ask me twice. I instantly ran for my room, taking the stairs two at a time, to put on a few more layers. I loved flying. It wasn’t just the rush of having my feet fifty yards off the ground. There was also the way Jessie held me so tightly. It felt very intimate and at the same time thrilling. As vampires were fond of saying, it was the only way to fly.



The snow was coming down in big, fluffy flakes. There was already at least two inches of it sticking to the ground. Jessie looked at the sky. "I love this weather for flying." He scanned the street, looking, listening, then turned to me and said, "Are you ready?" When I gave him a nod, he gathered me in his arms and launched into the air.

I suppressed the urge to let out a joyful shriek like a baby being tossed into the air. The snowflakes hit my face like someone was pelting me with cotton balls. Very icy cotton balls. "Higher," I squealed, unable to contain myself, and we brushed past the rooftops. I was so glad I'd put on as many layers as I did. As we ascended, the air got much colder rather quickly.

"Try to be a little quieter, darling," Jessie said in a low rumble while nuzzling my ear. "People do look up sometimes, you know."

"Sorry," I said, subduing my voice, if not my enthusiasm. It was just so great to fly.

Jessie danced me through the air, darting among the trees and then skyrocketing toward the stars. The snow brushed at my cheeks and got matted in my eyelashes. But still it was a beautiful night, and the snow was the perfect, fluffy consistency that filled children's story books and holiday specials. I'd flown with Jessie several times before, but usually it was under duress while we were fleeing other vampires or searching for Blossom or other stress-inducing reasons. It was great to take a moment to just enjoy the beauty of flight. Definitely a perk of dating a vampire.

"Let's go fast," I demanded like a little child on a merry-go-round. "I want to make the jump to hyperspace."

"As you wish," he said with a grin, squeezing me even closer.

An instant later, we were zooming toward the stars, the snow pelting us in harmless spurts of cold. As he went faster and faster, the snow and the stars began to blur together, and I couldn't help but laugh at the streaks of white rushing past my eyes. "It's wonderful," I told him, and I could tell that he was also enjoying racing me through the skies.



## Chapter 12

Eventually, play time was over, and Jessie set me down next to a large willow tree on a quiet corner a block away from the Thurman house. “We should walk from here,” he said, bestowing me with a kiss on my forehead.

Once my feet were on the ground, my spirits also fell. I had temporarily forgotten the solemn reason we were flying around with the snow tickling our faces. I felt a flash of guilt as I thought of Liz. I had to stop thinking of my own enjoyment and let Jessie focus on finding any clues he could. I wished I had thought of asking him earlier while her scent was still fresh, but I wasn’t used to having a boyfriend with a nose that could compete with a polar bear’s.

When the Thurman house was in sight, Jessie turned to me and said, “Why don’t you cross the street and wait for me there? I’m sure the girl’s family is already on edge and doesn’t need to see people lurking around in front of their home.” I wanted to point out that he’d be lurking, but then decided just to cross the street. I felt confident he knew what he was doing.

I jogged across the quiet street then turned to barely catch a glimpse of Jessie before he melded into the shadow of a tree. He was there and then he was gone. I stared at the spot where I had just seen him at the foot of a tall oak tree. If I concentrated, I mean really focused, I could make out his silhouette in the tree's shadow. He must have realized I could see him because I caught a flash of his white teeth as he smiled. A moment later he melted away. I caught a glimpse of him gliding across the lawn of the house next to the Thurmans', fast and distorted, like when you see the headlights of a car speeding across your bedroom ceiling at night. I looked at the fresh snow where he had just been, and I saw no tracks on the ground. If I didn't know he was there, I would have just assumed that it was the wind creating shadows with the swaying branches of the trees. I might have done a double take but then shrugged it off, my rational mind squelching my childish mind, which still feared monsters in the closet.

A shiver ran up my spine as I remembered the old man I thought I saw on the drive home. Was it just my mind playing tricks on me, or was he a vampire? Then I remembered what Mrs. Vanderlind had said about a cluster of vampires having just passed through town. He might have been a late guest that was on his way to catch up to the party.

A car turned onto the street a few blocks down from where I stood. I could tell from the lights on the roof that it was a cop car. I wasn't doing anything wrong; I was just standing there, but suddenly I felt a flash of guilt and panic. I couldn't think of why I would tell them I was standing there. I definitely didn't want to mention Jessie.

But then I was in Jessie's arms and he was kissing me. Passionately. I wanted to tell him that he needed to get the hell out of there, but he held me so firmly that I didn't struggle; I just sank into the kiss.

The cops pulled up next to us and flashed their lights. Only then did Jessie pull away from me. "Is there a problem, officer?" he asked, holding up a hand to shield his eyes from the flashing red.

The officer behind the wheel had rolled down his window. "What are you kids doing out here?" he asked.

“Just taking a walk with my girl and enjoying the snow,” was Jessie’s reply. He had kept hold of my hand and gave my fingers a squeeze.

I fought the urge to say something stupid like, “We weren’t doing anything.” As it was, I felt a little dizzy from Jessie’s unexpected embrace.

“Well, get on home,” the officer told us, his voice a bit gruff. “The people on this street have had enough hassle without a bunch of teenagers messing around.”

There wasn’t any reason for the cop to be annoyed with us. As far as he knew, we weren’t doing anything, and we were actually on the street to try to help. I felt like I should say something to defend our behavior and was just summoning up the courage when Jessie said, “Our apologies.” He started down the street tugging me after him. “Good night, officer.”

The cop car stayed where it was. I guess they were waiting to make sure we left. “That was so rude,” I grumbled once we had turned the corner and were on the next block. “He had no reason to interfere with us. We weren’t doing anything.”

“Try to look at it from his perspective. He was just doing his job,” Jessie said with a shrug. “I’m sure the family is on edge, and they have every right to be. They probably have patrols going by every twenty minutes or so just to make sure no one is prying into their business.” He gave me a firm look. “That’s actually a good thing.”

He was right. I had just gotten my ego bent out of shape because the cop was telling us what to do, but he was actually just trying to protect the Thurmans. It was only a few days ago that the police were telling crazed camera crews to leave my family alone, and I had been grateful for their interference then.

Jessie was more mature than me in so many ways. But he also didn’t seem like an adult; he felt like a teenager somehow. I wondered about that. Was he more mature because he had been around for an extra eighty years? Or was he more mature because people in their teens were more adult back when he actually became a teenager? I remembered reading somewhere that adolescence was a modern invention that really didn’t gain popularity until the 1950s.

“Did you find out anything about Liz?” I asked, deciding not to question Jessie as to if he thought of me as wildly immature.

“Not really,” he said with a slow, contemplative shake of his head. “Her scent trail is long gone, and I don’t see any signs of even the slightest struggle. There’s definitely no blood around,” he told me. “But that doesn’t really mean anything. She could have been grabbed off the sidewalk or gotten into somebody’s car of her own free will.” I guess he understood the horrified expression on my face because he quickly added, “Or she walked to the bus stop and paid with cash, and no one happened to remember. She could be with some friends right now hiding out.”

I thought about Liz’s closest friends, fighting back tears as they urged people to sign up and help in the search. “Unlikely,” I said, even though I knew he was trying to be kind. I didn’t know Liz very well, but she didn’t seem like the kind of girl that would put her family through hell just because she was mad at her dad over cell phone usage. I just didn’t think that was the kind of thing she would do.

Once we were a few blocks from the Thurman house, Jessie wrapped his arms around me and flew me home. “Do you want to come in?” I asked, once we had alighted in the front yard.

“I’d better just say good night,” Jessie said. As the words left his lips, my heart dropped. I had expected him to say yes, but he reassured me with a squeeze of my hand. “I have some last-minute holiday shopping that I need to complete.”

“It’s almost ten o’clock,” I told him. “I think all of the stores are closed.”

“I meant online,” he assured me. “There’s still time with rush delivery. You wouldn’t believe how hard it is to buy for people who have been around for a hundred years.” He let his shoulders rise and then drop a bit ruefully. “How many times can you buy your mother a nice pair of slippers?”

The idea of the undead logging in online to do their Christmas shopping somehow felt bizarre to me, but I completely understood the bind he was in. At least the next day would be our last day of classes, and then I would

have some time to figure out the phone situation. “Okay, well, good night,” I said, feeling awkward. Jessie seemed distracted, and I had grown accustomed to him kissing me good night. I turned to go.

Jessie quickly reached out and tugged me back to him, placing a tender kiss upon my lips. “Good night, my dear Aurora,” he whispered.

I knew Jessie was watching me as I climbed the front steps to the porch. He would never take off and leave me alone in the dark. He would wait until he knew I was safe first. But as I unlocked the door and pushed it open, there was a flapping of fabric. I turned my head to look anyway, even though I already knew he was gone. I placed my hand to my cheek and squinted into the night. Was something bothering Jessie, or was it just my imagination?

As I closed and locked the front door, my mother came clattering in from the living room. “Where the hell have you been?” she demanded.

“What do you mean, ‘Where the hell have I been?’ I’ve been out with Jessie. What’s the big deal?” I told her in a somewhat louder voice than I intended, immediately set on the defensive.

“I came home and the house was empty, but your car was in the garage. You could have left me a note, you know. You could have texted me that you were going out.” She sounded furious, sincerely angry, just because I had gone out for a walk.

I drew breath to tell her she needed to chill the hell out. I was a big girl, and I was out with my boyfriend. It wasn’t some major deal that she had to turn into a crisis. But then I thought of it from her perspective. She came home at night expecting to find me. I was usually pretty good about keeping her updated as to what I was doing but had completely spaced it in the anticipation of a night flight. Plus, a girl my age had disappeared less than a week ago. That had to have every parent on edge, not just the Thurmans.

“I’m sorry,” I said, quickly adjusting my attitude. I went over and put my arms around her, giving her a big hug. “I didn’t mean to scare you. Jessie came over and asked if I wanted to take a walk in the snow. I thought we would just be a little while, so I didn’t think to leave you a note, but then we got talking and lost track of time.”

When I first put my arms around her, Mom was wound tighter than a spring, but she started to relax almost immediately. Probably just knowing I was safe was helping her relax. “I was worried,” she said with a little pout.

I kissed her on the head and squeezed her some more. “I’m sorry. I should have texted. But I was fine; I was with Jessie. He’d never let anything happen to me.”

“Listen, sweetie,” she said, hugging me back. “I know teenage boys think they’re going to live forever, but they get kidnapped, too, you know.”



## Chapter 13

I had forgotten to tell Jessie about seeing the old man who may or may not have been a vampire. I only remembered in my dreams. He came tapping at my window and rattling at the front door, calling out to me to invite him in. I woke up two or three times with a start and once even got out of bed and peeped through a crack in the curtains to convince myself that no one was there.

I'll never understand why teachers try to get anything done the last day of school before winter break. Some of them even spring pop quizzes on us. They try to act like they're not just as excited about two weeks off as we are, but most kids know the truth.

It was still before lunch when I first heard the rumor that Don Updike was missing. Then there was a counter rumor that he had just taken off early to go skiing. Either way, he was definitely not at school. By lunch, the rumor that he was missing had gained strength. He'd been out canvassing for Liz with a couple of friends. They all lived fairly close to each other but

had split off to head to their respective homes at about seven-thirty. His buddies had made it home, but Don had not. It was all anybody could talk about at lunch. His parents had already contacted the police and tried to corral the few reporters still hanging around waiting to get some footage of Aunt Lettie's funeral. I decided I was going to ask Jessie to head over to the Updike's house just as soon as he got out of his coffin. The trail should still be fresh. Maybe he could figure out something.

"I'm really confused how I feel about this," Blossom said as we sat down at our usual table. "I mean, Don is usually kind of a jerk, but that doesn't mean I want him dead or anything."

I nodded, feeling a lump of fear in the back of my throat. Was Don already dead?

"Do you think the same person that snatched Liz is the one that got Don?" Sheila Lavelle asked, inserting herself into our conversation. Sheila was more Blossom's friend than mine. Blossom always insisted that she was nice, but I secretly suspected Sheila didn't consider me cool enough to hang out with. "I thought serial killers always went for the same type of person," she went on. "You know, like, they only kill prepubescent boys or they only kill women in their twenties with blonde hair or they only kill ..."

"Teenagers?" Blossom suggested.

We all sat chewing that idea over for a few seconds.

"Come on," I said. "Let's not get too morbid. First of all, we don't even know for sure if Don is missing. And even if he is missing, that doesn't mean he's dead. Or Liz either, for that matter."

"Yeah, maybe they've both just fallen into a big well," Blossom said dryly.

"But if it is the same killer, it's not very smart to keep grabbing kids from the same town," Sheila insisted. "I mean, not if whoever's doing this doesn't want to get caught."

"Maybe they just don't like Tiburon," Blossom suggested, crushing the mini-carton of the chocolate milk she'd had for lunch—that along with a candy bar.

“Oh, come on, it’s Tiburon,” Sheila insisted. “What did we ever do to them?”

Being the only one in the conversation who knew that we had a family of vampires living in town, I felt extra uncomfortable. Maybe it was someone with a vendetta against the Vanderlinds who was snatching up teenagers to get people riled up and pounding on doors, only to discover the neighbors have fangs. Then again, maybe it was just a garden variety psychopath who wasn’t very good at covering his trail. Neither option allowed me much room to relax.

“Are either of you done with Christmas shopping?” I asked, really wanting to change the subject.

They both stared at me for a second, then Blossom turned to Sheila and said, “Did you know that our little Aurora here is dating one of the Vanderlinds?”

My mouth fell open right along with Sheila’s. Yes, I had told my best friend about my boyfriend, but I hadn’t given her permission to tell anyone else. In fact, for whatever foolish reason, it had never occurred to me that she would tell anyone else. I just hadn’t thought about it.

“Vanderlinds as in the Vanderlind Castle?” Sheila asked, quite obviously a bit stunned.

Um ... yeah,” I said, feeling like an idiot. In part because I really didn’t want the word getting around and in part because Sheila seemed so incredulous.

“Yes, he’s one of *those* Vanderlinds,” Blossom supplied for me, rounding her eyes with the juiciness of the detail. The Vanderlinds were known to be painfully reclusive and ridiculously rich. “And he is gorgeous. Like, crazy gorgeous. I’ve met him, and you know I don’t make that stuff up.”

“Wow.” Sheila turned to look at me with renewed interest. I could see her reassessing me, thinking that maybe I wasn’t such a dork after all. “I was wondering why you weren’t desperately trying to get back together with Fred.” She shot Blossom a look. “I was totally going to ask you about

it. Nobody can figure it out.” Bouncing back to me again, she added, “So I guess you’re bringing him to Blossom’s on Christmas Eve.”

I was on the verge of saying something like “He has a family thing and can’t make it,” but Blossom cut me off. “She’s totally bringing him,” she said. “But I meant to tell you, my mom’s not letting us have it in the house this year.”

“You’re kidding. Why not?” Sheila wanted to know.

“Some jackholes were smoking in the house last year, and my mom could smell it.”

“Why would someone be such a jackhole?” Sheila said to be empathetic, but it wouldn’t have surprised me if she was one of the people who had been causing the problem.

“People who smoke always think they can be sneaky and no one else can smell it, but everyone totally can.” Blossom rolled her eyes. “So anyway, we have to have it in the backyard, but we’ve got some of those outdoor heaters and a fire pit, so I think it’ll be pretty warm.”

There it was. Blossom was having her holiday party in the backyard. Jessie could attend if he wanted. He couldn’t thwart me with scruples about entering someone’s home under false pretenses.

Was it right to bring a vampire to my best friend’s Christmas Eve party? I had to think about it. I did, after all, have some scruples of my own. Jessie wouldn’t harm anyone, but it was still something to consider. I knew from experience that exposure to vampires led to exposure to more vampires. On the other hand, my ego was feeling a bit raw from Sheila’s incredulous reaction to the fact that I had a boyfriend, let alone a gorgeous boyfriend, let alone someone as mysterious, rich, and elusive as a Vanderlind.

“We’ve got a family thing at the castle that Jessie can’t get out of for Christmas Eve,” I found myself saying without really thinking about it. I looked at Blossom. “It’s a tradition and it’s kind of a big deal that I’m invited, but we should be able to show up early at your place for a little while.”

Sheila reached across the lunch table and clutched at my arm. “I can’t believe you get to actually go inside the Vanderlind Castle. I want to get in there so bad. Just wait until I tell Meredith.”

Crap. I wanted to smack myself on the head. I knew I was being stupid talking about the castle. I knew I was being stupid as the words escaped my lips. If I was smart, I would have kept my mouth shut. But no, I had to brag. I had to show Sheila that I was cooler than she thought. And now she was going to tell her friend Meredith and probably any other eager ears that were willing to listen. Pretty soon, every girl in school and half the boys would know that I had been, as an invited guest, inside the Vanderlind Castle—a feat that no one else in town had ever accomplished during my lifetime. Not smart, not smart, not smart. I resisted another urge to thunk myself on the head. Instead, I opted to try for some damage control.

“Listen, do you two mind not telling anyone else about this?” I asked rather hastily. “Not yet, I mean. We haven’t been dating that long, and I really don’t want to blow it by talking about it too much. I kind of want to, you know, keep it on the down low. At least for now.”

“So, you’re not really dating him,” Sheila said, giving me a superior “I thought so” look.

“No, I am,” I insisted, but even I could tell my voice didn’t sound that confident.

“It’s the unicorn thing,” Blossom told her, quickly coming to my defense.

“The what?” Sheila obviously hadn’t followed the reference.

“It’s like seeing a unicorn in a meadow,” Blossom explained. “You want to tell people, but you’re afraid if you bring anyone else to the meadow, the unicorn will just run away.”

Sheila’s eyes shifted back over to me. “So, you’re not really sure if you’re dating a Vanderlind then.”

“No, I really am dating him,” I assured her. “I’m just not ready to go super public with it yet.”

“Okay, fine,” Sheila said with a sniff. “I guess I can keep my mouth shut. But we’ll know if you’re full of it for sure if you show up solo at Blossom’s party.”

*Oh great, I thought. I’m being taunted by Sheila Lavelle to bring a vampire to Christmas Eve.* What did it matter to her who I was dating? It’s not like I brought it up and was bragging about it or anything. I guess she somehow felt threatened, just in case I had an awesome boyfriend and she didn’t. My mom was always pointing out how the entertainment media is constantly encouraging females to compete over guys. It was a little depressing, but I had walked right into the trap, and now I felt like I had to bring Jessie to the party or deal with Sheila’s snide remarks.

I guess it was too much to expect that Sheila would actually keep her mouth shut. She must have told at least one or two people throughout the day—probably in a derogatory way, like I was lying about it and she had called me out—because at the end of the day, as I was pulling the books out of my locker that I would need for winter break, Fred sidled up. He had his hands jammed in his pockets, and there was a bit of a slouch to his stride.

“Hey,” he said, giving me a nudge without removing his hands from his pockets. I had no idea what he wanted, but he sounded like he had something on his mind.

“Hey,” I said back, still sorting through books.

“So ...” he began, “there’s this rumor going around the school that you’re dating one of those psychos from the Vanderlind Castle. I told people it wasn’t true, but ... you know ... I thought I’d better check.”

“Uh ...” I stalled for time as I mentally beat myself up for having a big mouth. I couldn’t even be mad at Blossom. She was repeating what I’d told her. “Yeah, it’s kind of true.”

“Oh.” Fred looked down at his shoes. “So that’s the guy you dumped me for?”

“Well ...” I flinched a little on the inside from giving him a straight up honest answer. I really hated hurting him. “Kind of,” was all I could

manage.

“Sure, I get it.” Fred nodded a couple of times. “He’s super rich and he lives in that big house and he’s all mysterious. I’m sure he’s getting you something crazy expensive for Christmas.”

“Actually, we agreed to a spending cap,” I said in a small voice.

“Yeah, well, just be careful, Aurora. They’re a really weird family,” he said. “My great grandfather used to work up at the castle back in the thirties, and he doesn’t have a lot of positive stuff to say about the family.”

I did a double take. “Your great grandfather is still alive?”

“Kind of,” was Fred’s reply. “He’s not too with it anymore. Mostly just sits in his chair and stares at nothing. He’s closing in on one hundred, so we don’t hassle him too much about it. Sometimes they turn the TV on for him at the home, but he doesn’t watch it.”

I had to wonder how Fred and I had dated for over a month, but I didn’t know his great grandfather was still alive. He knew about my great grandmother. I had to conclude that I had been kind of a crappy girlfriend. He deserved better than some chick who pretty much ignored him because she was hung up on a vampire. “I don’t suppose he’s staying at Ashtabula Care?” I asked, knowing it was a long shot.

Fred gave me a funny look. “How did you know?”

“Just a guess,” I assured him. “That’s where my great grandmother stays. We should introduce them sometime. They both worked at the castle. Maybe they could date.”

That earned me a small chuckle, and Fred loosened up ever so slightly. “Yeah, okay. Maybe. If Gramps is having a good day.” Then he quickly grew grave again. “But seriously, Aurora. Do you know what you’re doing with this Vanderlind twerp? I mean, first he didn’t want to date you. Now he wants to date you, but not go to your best friend’s party. It sounds kind of like he’s jerking you around. And you have to admit,” he said, fixing me with a look, “he lives in a creepy-ass building.”

“I’ll be careful,” I assured him, simultaneously wondering if anyone had ever referred to Jessie Vanderlind as a “twerp” before. “But you know he can’t help that he has a crazy family history. And besides, I think if you met him, you’d think he was nice.”

“I doubt it,” Fred grumbled. “Anyway,” he pulled his hand out of his jeans, yanking out a small wrapped box with it. “I know the twerp’s probably giving you a giant diamond or something, but here.” He shoved the box toward me. “Merry Christmas.” He leaned in and swiftly kissed me on the lips. I completely wasn’t expecting it and didn’t even have time to react. Then he turned and strode quickly away.

I stared at the small package resting on my palm. How could something so small make me feel so guilty? I knew feeling guilty was a real chick thing to do, but that didn’t stop me. I shoved the box into my bag with my books and slammed my locker shut. I wasn’t ready to open Fred’s present. In fact, I made it all the way to my VW before curiosity got the better of me and I tore off the wrapping paper. Inside was a small square box with a lid. It was the white cardboard kind you get in the department store when you buy something nice but not crazy expensive at the jewelry counter. With some trepidation, I pulled off the lid and blinked at a pair of silver earrings laid out on a bed of cotton.

The earrings were composed of dozens of little dots all linked together making kind of a triangle of mesh. I picked one up and looked at it, the triangle hanging down almost like a piece of cloth. They were on the large side and something I wouldn’t have picked for myself, but maybe that was a good thing. Sometimes you need to get a gift that isn’t you so you have the opportunity to try something new. There was definitely something appealing about them. If the earrings didn’t come with a bunch of guilt and weirdness, I would have worn them. As it was, I was worried that wearing them would give Fred hope that he could win me back. He really did deserve an awesome girlfriend, and I felt bad that the girl couldn’t be me. My heart belonged to Jessie. And while I was thinking about it, Jessie was easily burned by silver, so there was definitely no way I could ever wear Fred’s earrings. That would be like smearing myself in Jiff if I was dating someone with a peanut allergy.



I didn't have time to get all tangled up in guilt about Fred. I had to get to the mall and sort out a phone for Jessie. I needed to focus. I closed the lid on the box and jammed it in the pocket of my book bag then started up my bug.

"Hey!" Blossom said, rapping on the passenger's side window and alarming the crap out of me. "Did you forget about Liz or what?"

## Chapter 14

Another opportunity to buy Jessie's present was lost. But I couldn't count the time as wasted because I was trying to help find Liz. And Don, too, hopefully. We didn't have a photo of Don or anything, but we mentioned him, just in case someone knew something.

"This is getting depressing," Blossom said dryly as we trekked down the sidewalk to yet another house. "If any more kids disappear, we're going to have to start keeping a list."

I knew she was kidding, but her comment made me shiver. One missing kid at a time was more than enough for me.

Blossom must have misinterpreted my silence because she said, "Listen, I'm sorry about the Sheila thing at lunch. I was just bragging on you a little. I didn't mean for it to get weird."

"That's okay," I told her. It was completely my fault. I was the one dating the vampire. "Let's just get the rest of our houses done. I'm getting kind of creeped out at night lately."

"Yeah, me, too," Blossom agreed, lengthening her stride.

As the sun began to go down, we took a break for a moment, and I called a number Jessie had given me for the castle. I'd never actually called the number before, and I knew Blossom was watching me intently, so it made me extra nervous. "Don't you want to get a snack or something?" I asked her as the phone was ringing. We were standing in a gas station lot, figuring that a public place was reasonably safe.

"No, I'm fine," she told me. She sensed that I was calling my boyfriend, and I knew it would take a brick of dynamite to get her away long enough

for me to have any privacy.

“Wanderlind Castle,” a deep voice with a Russian accent said, answering the phone.

“Hi, Viggo. It’s Aurora,” I said, my own voice sounding like a little girl’s in comparison. I felt like a small child around him, too. He was, after all, the tallest man I had ever seen.

“Ah, Miss Aurora,” Viggo said, sounding rather pleased. “My Gloria was so happy to hear that you will be at the house for Christmas Eve. She is wary much looking forward to seeing you.”

“Tell her that I said hello and that I’m looking forward to seeing her, too.” I could tell from the expression on Blossom’s face that she could hear his entire half of the conversation, so I said my next sentence very carefully. “I know that Jessie isn’t in right now, but would you please have him call me as soon as he gets back?”

“Yes, I am happy to give Mr. Wanderlind that message,” Viggo replied.

“Who was that?” Blossom asked after I’d hung up.

“Just a guy who works for the Vanderlinds,” I told her. He was some type of servant at the castle. Maybe he was a butler or a valet or something. I didn’t know his job title; I only knew he was excessively loyal to Jessie.

“Wow, so you really are Jessie Vanderlind’s girlfriend,” Blossom said, slightly amazed.

“Did you think I was lying?”

“No ...” She thought it over. “I mean, I obviously believed you and all, but it’s one thing to have your best friend say she’s dating a super hot rich guy and another thing to have a servant at the mansion know her by name and act all cheery to hear from her. And by her I mean you, obviously.”

I could tell Blossom was doing her best not to sound like a jerk for being a little suspicious, but maybe Sheila had planted some seeds of doubt. At least she would have something to defend me with when Sheila got at her again.

The phone was ringing as I walked in the door. I would have charged over and snatched it out of its cradle, but my mom was already reaching for it, and I didn't want to seem like a complete spaz. "It's for you," Mom said, holding it out to me. "Jessie," she added, suppressing a little smile at my poorly concealed excitement. "Deep breaths," she whispered, clamping her hand over the receiver. Then she headed upstairs without giving me a second glance. She was cool about stuff like that. I appreciated that she allowed me my privacy.

"Hi, Jessie," I said into the phone, my heart racing just at the thought of hearing his voice. It was almost like I was suffering under some kind of love spell like you'd see in a cheesy movie.

"Good evening, Aurora," he said, his voice melting into my ear. "Viggo was very pleased to speak with you earlier."

I had to giggle a little. Years ago, Gloria had sold herself into servitude to a vampire family to pay off her father's massive debt to the mob. I had arranged for Jessie to take over the debt so that Gloria, the love of Viggo's life, could move from Budapest to Tiburon. It had completely won Viggo over as my friend for life. A Russian giant as a friend really was an awesome accessory for any teenage girl. "Is Gloria happily settled in?" I asked, feeling embarrassed that I hadn't bothered to ask about her earlier. She'd been in America for almost a month.

"Oh, yes," was his reply. "They are like lovebirds. I even caught Viggo humming the other day. His voice is not bad."

I gave another chuckle but then had to turn the conversation rather abruptly. "I'm sorry I had to call you while you were sleeping," I told him, "but another kid has disappeared from my school and I was hoping ..."

"What's his address?" Jessie asked before I could even finish asking for the favor. After I gave him directions to Don's house, he said, "I'll go take a look around right now. Would you like me to come by afterward?" he asked.

"Yes, please," I said, sighing into the phone. It was true Jessie was a member of the undead, but to me he was a knight in shining armor.

The glow of Jessie's armor started to fade a little when two hours later I still hadn't heard from him. I didn't know if I should feel hurt or concerned or what. At about ten-thirty, my mom tapped at my door. For a brief flash, I thought that maybe Jessie had finally come by and I hadn't heard him ring.

"You know we've got Colette's funeral tomorrow," Mom said, sticking her head in my room.

"I know," I told her. But if I was being honest, I had mostly forgotten. It was a good thing she had reminded me because I was thinking of texting Joe and asking him if he needed me to work a shift. People never tipped well at a coffee house, but they did tend to tip slightly better around the holidays, and if I was going to pull off a phone for Jessie, I needed all the cash I could get.

"I'm not sure if there will be anyone else besides us," Mom said, taking a few steps into my room. "I don't mind, but I hope Grams doesn't feel too hurt."

I got up from where I was sprawling on the bed with a magazine and put my arms around her. Mom cared so much about other people. "I don't know if there are that many people left who remember Colette," I told her. "We'll just have to be enough."

"I know this is going to sound horrible," Mom said, hesitating over her words, "but I'm almost glad Colette's body was stolen for a bit."

"What?" I gave her a concerned look. That was definitely not something my mother would say.

"Well, if whoever took her didn't give us that five thousand dollars as an apology, getting her a gravestone and everything would be pretty tough."

"I'm sure whoever took her was glad to help out with the money," I assured her.

I tried to go to bed but, of course, I couldn't sleep. I kept thinking I heard Jessie tapping at my bedroom window. I even got up a few times to

check. It was a switch from the other night when I was terrified that there was a vampire outside waiting for me.

But I also really hate being stood up. It's so frustrating and at the same time oddly humiliating. My mom told me she was once stood up on Valentine's Day. The guy just never showed. Fortunately, she had bought him a box of chocolates, so she had that as a balm for her injured ego. A few weeks later, she ran into him at a café, and he acted like it was no big deal. Then he had the nerve to ask her out again. She said no, obviously.

But Jessie standing me up was a little different. I assumed he wasn't just being some inconsiderate jerk. Either something was wrong that he didn't want to tell me, or something bad had happened. Or he was blowing me off for my own protection. My brain started building up a head of steam. Or he was battling another vampire. Or he'd found Liz and Don's bodies and couldn't control himself from feasting upon them. Or he'd suddenly decided loving me wasn't worth the hassle. Or ... Gah! I shook my head. The whole thing was too emotionally exhausting.

The next morning it was raining, and all the beautiful, fresh, white snow turned into gray slush. I layered up with two pairs of thick tights, a turtleneck, wool socks, skirt, and sweater. Grandma Gibson didn't want any kind of church service for Colette; she just wanted to be there at the grave. Mom didn't press her on the church issue. Most people as they age become more religious, but Grandma Gibson had become less.

When I came downstairs, Mom was already dressed and ready to go. "I thought we might as well take Grams out to breakfast before the funeral," she said. "It feels weird not to do anything besides go to the cemetery."

We struggled into our boots and coats. As we were heading out the door, Mom suddenly started frowning and looking around. "What?" I asked.

"I think we're going to need some umbrellas, but yours is red and mine has big purple flowers all over it. We don't have anything cemetery appropriate." She began biting her lower lip. "I don't suppose we could quickly dash into the mall."

I gave her a flat look. “Mom, it’s Saturday and Christmas is Wednesday. There’s no dashing in anywhere.”

“You’re probably right,” she said, frowning some more. “But we can’t have Grams standing around in the rain.”

An idea occurred to me. “Don’t they have umbrellas they use for the residents at the home? Maybe we could ask to borrow a couple of those.”

“That sounds like a better plan than going to the mall,” Mom agreed, so we headed for the car.

There were only two news crews when we arrived at the home. I guess they were trying to get establishing shots before shooting the story at the cemetery. Mom had spoken to someone higher up at the cemetery, and they assured her that they would do their best to keep the media away from our service. Of course, that wouldn’t stop them from standing outside the gate, but hopefully they wouldn’t get in.

Grandma Gibson was sitting in the lobby waiting for us by the time we arrived. Mom got her to the car while I asked about the umbrellas. “Of course, you can, sweetie,” the woman behind the counter said when I asked for the loan. “You just have to sign for them. Too many residents take them out and then we never see them again.”

“We’ll be careful,” I assured her.

“That’s a good thing,” she said. “But just so you know, if you lose them, your grandmother’s account will be charged.” As I quickly filled out the form, she added, “We were all real sad to hear about Lily’s sister. She never talks much to anyone, but a lot of the residents feel real bad.”

“Thank you,” was all I could think to say as I signed the form, grabbed the two black umbrellas she handed me, and hurried out the door.





## Chapter 15

I had kind of been dreading breakfast with my great grandmother, but it turned out to be almost enjoyable. She was in a very lucid state, and she had decided to focus on the positive memories she had of Colette's life rather than her disappearance and death. I decided the hell with curtailing my eating for that meal and ordered the full breakfast. I once heard an English comedian joke that one of the best things to come out of the United States was an American-style breakfast, and he may have been right.

It was getting close to noon, so we headed for the cemetery. At that point, it was drizzling pretty steadily, but at least it wasn't pouring down. There were only half a dozen news vans outside the cemetery gate. Instead of the gates being open for cars to drive on through, like they usually were for any cemetery, they were closed, and there were two guards posted to make sure no news crews gained access. I had a sneaking suspicion that Jessie might have floated some cash toward paying for the extra help, and I

felt grateful. I wished he had at least called me to say he wasn't going to show up the previous night, but I still felt grateful.

I was surprised when we pulled into the lot. It wasn't exactly jammed with cars, but it was about two-thirds full. "Who else has died recently?" Mom wondered aloud as she hunted for a spot that would call for Grandma Gibson to walk the shortest distance.

As we headed across the lawn to the same plot where Grandma Gibson's parents were buried, the drizzle stopped; the clouds parted; and the sun did its best to make it a beautiful day. I closed my umbrella. "Hey," a familiar voice called, and I turned around to see Blossom and her mom.

"What are you doing here?" I asked, completely surprised.

Blossom shrugged. "We thought we'd come and pay our respects."

Then I did a double take as I saw Fred helping a very ancient gentleman across the lawn. He waved, flashing me a handsome smile. "Gramps said he'd like to come," was his explanation as we came within speaking distance.

The senior Mr. Lighton was a stately gentleman with a surprising amount of white hair. He was the spitting image of his great grandson, if I subtracted eighty years or so. "That's really nice of you," I told Fred in a low voice. "I appreciate it."

"Of course," he said, as if dragging a centenarian across town to the funeral of a woman neither of them had ever met and who had actually died several decades earlier was no big deal.

As we got closer to the burial plot, it became obvious that the Lightons and the Costers weren't the only Tiburon residents who had decided they wanted to pay their respects. There were a couple dozen old people. I had a feeling that Ashtabula Elder Care had bused them in, although I didn't see their van or anything in the parking lot. It made the hate I had felt for them on the day we picked Grandma up to drive her to the morgue melt away. I knew some of them probably just viewed the burial as an afternoon's entertainment, but some were there out of genuine compassion.

My boss, Joe, was there, much to my surprise. Seeing him outside of Cup of Joe's was like seeing a teacher outside of school; it always felt wrong, but I appreciated him coming. There were also some of my teachers, the school principal, and some of the people my mom worked with. It totaled up to quite a tidy crowd. There were even a couple of flower arrangements. I'm afraid Mom and I hadn't thought about providing any. Someone even had the foresight to provide a couple dozen folding chairs so the elderly had a place to sit. I thought I knew who to give credit to for that bit of gallantry. Jessie couldn't attend the funeral, but I could see that he had been giving it quite a bit of thought. There were three open seats at the front of the crowd, nearest the open grave, obviously there for us.

Grandma Gibson had decided to have Colette cremated, in part to keep random jerks from trying to steal her body again. Her ashes were to be placed on top of her mother's coffin. Grams thought both her mom and Colette would have appreciated that. A smaller headstone had been added below that of her parents with the words "Beloved daughter and sister" carved into the modest piece of marble along with Colette's name and the dates of her birth and death, although the death date was really just an estimate as the night she ran away from home.

As we headed for our seats, I was suddenly gripped by a wave of anxiety and gave an involuntary shudder. There was that old expression, "A goose just walked over my grave." I had an instant understanding of what it meant, at least by intent. My heart started pounding painfully in my chest, and it was hard for me to breathe. I found myself sweating profusely in my winter wool coat. There were spots in front of my eyes, and my peripheral vision faded to black. I looked around a bit frantically for a moment, not sure why I was freaking out. Were we under attack? What was happening? Then I realized it was the tombstone. Colette's tombstone. I felt like I was looking at my own grave.

I felt a sharp nudge quite close to my behind, which startled me. I whipped my head around, incredulous that anyone would think a funeral was an appropriate time for a bit of light sexual assault. An elderly lady with white curls peeking out from under a fur-trimmed hat leaned forward and said in a sharp whisper, "Sit down. This isn't about you."

She was right, and she was wrong. It might very well have been about me if reincarnation existed. Half of me wanted to say something snarky back to her, but she had snapped me out of my panic attack, and from the perspective of everyone else at the ceremony, she was right. “Thank you,” I whispered to her and took my seat.

We all sat quietly, and I wondered what was going to happen next. As far as I knew, we really hadn’t planned anything. I wanted to catch my mother’s eye, but Grandma Gibson was seated between us. She had been acting very courageous throughout breakfast and the drive to the cemetery, but I could tell that the outpouring of support from people that had never even met Colette really touched her. She had to press her handkerchief to her nose.

A woman in a long, dark coat who must have been some kind of minister or something got up and spoke, standing at a little portable pulpit-type thing near the head of the grave. I really had no idea who she was or even what denomination she represented. She could have easily just been a lady who had wandered into the cemetery from off the street and decided to take charge, for all I knew. She talked about grief and loss and forgiveness but fortunately kept it brief.

I thought after the minister finished that would be the end of it, but then my great grandmother struggled to her feet. Mom and I exchanged alarmed looks. Neither of us had expected her to speak. Still, there was nothing we could do but make sure she didn’t topple over as she slowly made her way to the pulpit, which the minister readily relinquished.

I felt my guts clench, and stomach acid bubbled at the back of my throat. Was this going to be a repeat of the morgue? Was Grams about to start shouting about how Jessie Vanderlind had killed her sister? It wasn’t out of the realm of possibility. I could tell by the worried expression on my mother’s face that she was thinking the same thing.

Grandma Gibson steadied herself and then spent some time looking at the faces assembled before her. “Thank you for coming,” she said when she finally began. “I honestly thought it was just going to be my granddaughter, my great granddaughter, and me. I’m touched that so many of you braved

the weather today to help me say goodbye to my dear sister, Colette.” Grandma Gibson brushed at a single tear that was slowly making its way down her cheek. “She was a beautiful girl with a very generous heart. She couldn’t know someone was in trouble or in need without wanting to help.” I began to relax a little. Grandma was keeping her speech to the positive side of her sister’s life. Grams continued. “That’s probably what made her such an easy victim for whoever killed her. I can’t tell you how many times over the last eighty years I’ve laid awake at night thinking about what might have happened to her. I’d always hoped that she was somewhere alive and happy but always knew deep in my heart that wasn’t true. She wouldn’t have done that to us. She wouldn’t have done that to Momma and Papa, and she wouldn’t have done that to me.” Her voice broke there, and she hid her face in her handkerchief.

Mom and I were on our feet instantly to comfort her. But we weren’t fast enough; when Grandma Gibson looked up again, her eyes were blazing. “There’s an evil that lives in this town. An evil that killed my sister. An evil that hides behind money and large donations to the police department. An evil that’s now grabbing children off the streets.”

My mom was at her grandmother’s side, wrapping an arm around her, easing her from the pulpit. “It’s okay, Gram Gram,” she said in a low voice. “Colette can rest now. It’s okay.”

Everyone just stared at us. It wasn’t your typical funeral speech, and I’m not sure anybody knew how to react. Mom was busy with Grandma Gibson, so I felt I should probably say something. I needed to thank people for attending and then shoo them away. I turned to face the crowd, but my tongue felt awkward and clumsy in my mouth.

My boss, Joe, took a few steps forward from where he’d positioned himself in the back, raised a hand in the air to draw attention, and said, “The family has invited all of you to come to Cup of Joe’s for coffee, tea, and biscotti after the service.”

People began collecting themselves to leave. Joe strode through the crowd and whispered to me, “I’m afraid you’re going to have to help. This was kind of an impulse thing, so we’re not staffed for a crowd.”

“Thank you so much,” I said in reply. “You’ve got a free worker for however long it takes to pay you back.”

Joe scrunched his nose and waved me off. “Don’t worry about it. I’m just ready for the reporters to clear out of town so I can put you back on the schedule.”

With people extending their condolences and everything, we were some of the last people out the cemetery gate. The reporters were there as we left, hoping for a shot of us. It was weird. I’m not sure what they thought was going to happen. Did they expect the killer was going to appear and confess or something?

The Thurmans and the Updikes were there as well, holding up enlarged photos of their children, hoping to get some camera time. “I think we need to stop,” Grandma Gibson said. “Helen, would you please pull over.”

I knew Mom was about to protest, but then she saw the grim faces of the families trying so desperately to get anyone in the media to care about their missing children, and she pulled over to the side of the drive outside the gates.

I’ve never been attacked by wolves, or even a pack of stray dogs, but I have a slight inkling of how it would go. First the wolves notice something has changed; they sniff the air and start looking around rather eagerly. Then they notice you. They freeze for a moment, marveling at their good fortune, wondering if there will be any way to squeeze some kind of award nomination out of a really good interview. Not a Pulitzer, obviously, but something that at least comes with a trophy and bragging rights. Then the wolves turn as a unit and rush toward you. Not growling and drooling with their ears pinned back, but baring their teeth with gleeful smiles, shoving microphones in your face, thrilled with the idea of ripping you to shreds and consuming you, even before your heart stops beating.

Grandma Gibson stood tall, legs braced but slightly bent at the knee, like you stand when you are on a beach and expect a big wave to crash over you. Mom and I glued ourselves to her side, but the reporters immediately had her surrounded, shouting questions. Really stupid ones like, “Who do

you think killed your sister?” and “Do you think the person who stole the body was the same one that killed her?” I would have been surprised if any of their questions were scripted.

The Updikes and Thurmans just stared at us, worry and grief weighing down their shoulders. Grandma raised her hand and waved them over, looking the reporters and cameramen in the eyes as she said, “Let them through, please. You, sir, please let these people through.”

Mom and I made room for Mrs. Thurman and Mrs. Updike, who were both holding photos of their children. Their husbands and other children crowded in behind. It made my heart ache to see that Don had two little brothers. He was probably one of those big brothers that little boys loved, that showed them how to use bottle rockets and gave them all the gruesome details of dissecting a frog in biology.

“I have something to say,” Grandma said, ignoring all the questions being lobbed at her. I held my breath. She did, after all, know the truth about the Vanderlinds, and for this brief moment in time, she had the attention of the world.

“My sister disappeared eighty years ago,” Grandma began. “There wasn’t television or the Internet or any of those things back then, so the only people who knew about it were local people. But in these modern times, an image can be seen around the world.” She took the photos from the two mothers. “These two babies are missing, and someone out there knows what happened to them. Maybe you saw something that looked suspicious but were hesitant to bring it up. Maybe you overheard someone talking in a bar. I don’t know, but if you’ve heard something, anything at all, then you need to call the Tiburon police department and tell them what you know. You need to do it right now.”

She took a deep breath before looking directly into the camera again. “Or maybe you’re the person who kidnapped these two children. I’m sure you know what you did is wrong. And I’m sure on some level you are sorry. Please just let these children go. Or call the police anonymously and tell them where they are. I know that you’re probably in pain, but you are causing other people pain, too. You might think on some level that’s what

you want to do, but I know, deep in your heart, you are a good person. Yes, you've done something that is very wrong, but that doesn't erase all the good things you've done in your life. And now you have the chance to do the best thing you can possibly do by helping reunite these children with their families." Grandma handed the photos back to the mothers. "Please," she said to Mrs. Updike, "you go first. Tell them about your boy."

I was so very proud of my grandmother, it nearly brought tears to my eyes. I'm sure it caused her some pain not to mention the vampires living down by the river, but that wouldn't have done Liz and Don a bit of good. It would have only sensationalized things. She knew that, and she put her convictions aside to help.

By the time the reporters finished up and we drove over to Cup of Joe's, there was already a note posted on the door reading "closed for a private event." The place was crowded with the senior set. I grabbed an apron and scooted behind the counter to scrub my hands and get busy. Joe had decided on only simple orders. No triple shot decaf lattes with extra foam or whatever else people liked to imagine they needed to get through the day. The seniors were absolutely fine with a cup of coffee or tea. Joe set out some biscotti and various sweet rolls that he'd divided into smaller portions. A large plate of sugar cookies and a deli tray seemed to appear out of nowhere. Joe usually had a rule about no outside food, but this was an obvious exception.

Mom stuck by Grandma Gibson, and I saw Fred lead his great grandfather over to be introduced. I wondered if that was a good thing. I wanted Grams to have some friends at the nursing home. She and Mr. Lighton obviously had things in common. But I didn't want them to agitate each other about the Vanderlinds. I didn't put it past my great grandmother to try to incite the seniors at the home to sharpen a few snooker cues and storm the castle.





## Chapter 16

As we drove up to Ashtabula Elder Care, it was obvious the news crews were gone. Both Colette and the story had been laid to rest. The whole thing would probably only come up again if the police somehow discovered her murderer, but that was unlikely. I was sure they assumed whoever did kill Colette was long ago dead and buried. Unfortunately, I wasn't quite sure about that, myself.

"I'm a bit tired today," Grandma said as we walked into the facility. "I think I want to lie down."

"I can help you, ma'am," an orderly said, immediately snagging a wheelchair that was close at hand. "Your family can sign back in for you."

"Thank you, young man," she said, gratefully sinking into the chair as he held it steady for her. She looked up at us, and there was a weariness etched across her face. "Thank you, Helen. Thank you, Lettie. I had a

wonderful afternoon,” she said as the man began rolling her down the hall toward her room.

We both looked after her as she disappeared around a corner. “She must be very tired,” Mom commented. “She hasn’t called you by Colette’s name in a long time.”

Not too long ago, it really bothered me when my great grandmother called me by her dead sister’s name. But now, in a weird way, it made me feel good that I could provide an old lady some comfort. If her brain had somehow temporarily erased over her sister’s funeral and she was able to get a little sleep thinking I was Colette, then that was fine by me. I suddenly felt quite tired myself and was looking forward to going home and sitting on the couch in front of the television for a while.

It was only as we approached the front desk to sign Grams back in that I remembered I had put my borrowed black umbrella on the ground next to my chair and then never thought of it again. Mom had hers, of course; it was just me who had been absentminded.

“Let’s just pay for it,” Mom said with a sigh when I confessed to the loss.

“Are you sure you don’t want to call the cemetery and check if it’s there?” the lady at the desk asked. “You’ll be charged eighty-five dollars plus tax.”

Mom’s mouth dropped open a little. “That’s a lot for an umbrella,” she managed to say.

The lady shrugged. “I guess getting the really nice ones was the only way to make the residents’ families responsible for not losing them.”

Both of the adults turned to look at me. It was as if they expected me to confess to being an irresponsible teenager or something. Instead, I pulled out my cell phone, looked up the number for the cemetery, and dialed. The line was engaged. “It’s busy,” I said, hanging up. “Their website says the cemetery doesn’t close until six-thirty. Let’s just swing by. I’m sure whoever gathered the chairs found it. Don’t cemeteries have a lost and found?”

Mom shook her head slightly. “Sweetie, by the time we drive there, then come back here, and then go home, that’ll be an extra two hours of driving around. And I have a ton of work I really need to get done.”

“Okay, fine,” I told her. “Let’s just go home, and then I’ll grab my car. No big deal.”

Both adults made disapproving faces. Mom said, “It is a big deal when you know there’s a maniac snatching kids off the sidewalk.”

She had a point. I tried the number again. This time it went straight to voicemail. “Okay,” I said, re-evaluating my plan. “I’ll keep the doors locked, like I always do, and I won’t get out of my car for anything. I’ll just drive up to the gate and ask. If they don’t have it, the money can come out of my paycheck.”

I must have said the right thing because the lady behind the counter gave me a smile of approval. “That’s very responsible of you,” she said. She wrote something on a piece of paper. “Call this number once you know whether you have the umbrella or not. If you find it, you can bring it by in the next couple of days. That should at least save you some time. I’ll make a note in Lily’s file so you’re not charged.”

As we headed home, Mom kept frowning and making little noises in the back of her throat. “What is it?” I finally asked her after the seventh or eighth small grunt.

“I’m not sure I should let you go to the cemetery by yourself,” she admitted. “Me having a couple of extra hours to plug into work isn’t worth the risk of having my daughter kidnapped.”

“Mom,” I said, trying not to roll my eyes. “I will use every precaution you’ve ever taught me. I will not get out of the car, and if anyone so much as looks at me funny, I will run them over; I promise.”

This made Mom chuckle a little. “Okay,” she said, relenting. “I suppose I can’t keep you locked in the house. Just be as smart as possible. This weirdo might even be someone we know.”

After we got home and I headed out in my own car, I had a brief flash of anxiety wondering if I was being stupid and actually risking my life for

eighty-five dollars.

But that had to be nonsense. We couldn't be made prisoners in our own homes because of some sicko psycho. Besides, we didn't even know for sure if Liz's and Don's disappearances were connected.

I distracted myself from frightening thoughts of what had happened to my fellow classmates by fretting over Jessie's Christmas present. Another entire shopping day was gone, and still no purchase had been made. My cell phone tweeted at me, letting me know I had a text. I waited until I caught a red light before I fished it out of my bag. The message was from my boss. "Cyndi is on the schedule for tomorrow, and she just twisted her ankle. Jareth has the flu. I know this is last minute, but can you work a double?"

"No," I said to myself with a groan. "I can't work a double shift. No. No. No." But I knew that I would. First of all, Joe had just done me a mega-favor that I was sure had cost him a bit of money. Second, he had given me a lot of time off already while my family was the temporary focus of the twenty-four-hour news cycle. And third, smartphones aren't cheap, and I couldn't see getting Mr. Jessie Vanderlind anything that wasn't top of the line. "Of course," I texted back at the next light. "You've got me for as long as you need me."

I realized with a shudder that I was going to have to get Jessie's gift on the eve of Christmas Eve. I really hated the idea of fighting my way to the mall with all the other panicked shoppers, but it looked like I didn't have a choice.

The sky was already dark as I pulled up to the cemetery at exactly ten to six. The tall iron gate was wide open, and the extra guards were gone. I could see a man in a staff uniform sitting in the small stone building that served as the information center. Pulling my VW up as close as I could to the door, I parked and went inside. "Hi," I said, smiling at the man, who seemed a bit surprised to see me. "I was at the Colette Gibson funeral this afternoon, and I left a large black umbrella by my chair. Do you know if anyone turned it in?"

He was a very broad man with a bald head who looked like he did a lot of sitting. He shrugged his shoulders. "Nobody gave nothing to me."

“Great,” I grumbled, letting my shoulders sag. Eighty-five bucks out the window. “Oh well. Thanks anyway.” I turned to head for the door. Not only did I owe the home eighty-five dollars, but I had wasted gas driving over to find out.

“Wait a minute,” he said. “I’ll check around for you.” He picked up the phone and dialed. “This is gonna take a minute.”

My hopes were not up, but it didn’t hurt to check. As I waited, I strode over to the window. I could tell by the ripples in the glass that the panes were probably original from when the old stone building was first built. I wondered if they had electricity back then. It made the world outside look a bit blurry in spots. I could see the parking lot, but a couple of the few remaining cars appeared as smeary blobs. If I moved my head slightly, those cars came into focus and others appeared smudged like someone had dragged a thumb across a still-damp oil painting.

As I shifted about, playing with the optical illusion the old glass created, I was able to focus on one very distinct vehicle in the parking lot. It was an antique limousine, probably from the thirties or forties. I knew absolutely nothing about cars, but that was my guess. It had running boards and looked like a car that gangsters would be hanging off of in an old black and white movie—if the gangsters happened to be very, very rich. There was only one family I knew of anywhere near Tiburon that could afford such a vehicle. I was hurrying for the door when the man at the desk called out to me, “For some reason, nobody cleaned up from the Gibson funeral yet. Your umbrella might still be there.” He gestured in the general direction of the graves. “You got to hurry up, though. We’re gonna close soon.”

“Okay. Thanks,” I said, dashing out the door. I headed straight for the fancy limousine. The windows in the back of the vehicle were all tinted. I could discern that the front seat was occupied. In fact, it looked very crowded, but I was willing to bet it was filled by only one man.

“Viggo?” I asked, tapping on the driver’s side window.

The door opened and the tallest man imaginable hauled himself out of the car. “Good evening, Miss Aurora,” he said with his faint Eastern

European accent. I thought he was pleased to see me, but sometimes it was hard to tell. “It is getting late. What are you doing back at the cemetery?”

“I forgot an umbrella and it turned out to be an expensive umbrella, so I came back to try to find it.” He just nodded, his face inscrutable. After several seconds, with him adding nothing more to the conversation, I asked. “Why are you here?”

“Mr. Wanderlind wanted to come to the funeral, but as you know this was not possible. He asked me to load him in the car and then wake him when it was dark.

“Jessie’s here?” I asked, doing a bad job of keeping the eagerness out of my voice.

Viggo nodded again. “He has been here since it started to get dark. I think he feels very bad that he could not attend the service.”

I had to force my legs not to immediately hurry in the direction of Colette’s grave. I was mad at Jessie for blowing me off, but that didn’t stop me from wanting to see him. “Does he ...” I stammered. “I mean, do you think he wants to be alone or ... do you think maybe I could ...” I waved a hand vaguely toward the headstones.

“I have never known Mr. Vanderlind to not want to be with you,” the giant said.

I felt my heart skip a beat, and a warm glow crept over my body. This was the effect even a secondhand comment about Jessie had on me. “Okay, then I guess I’d better go find him.”

“Let me escort you,” Viggo said in his deep, booming voice.

“That’s all right. You just relax,” I said. “I know where it is.”

“No,” Viggo said, with such conviction that it left no room for argument. “There is a killer loose in Tiburon. A man so sneaky that even Mr. Wanderlind can’t find him. I do not trust for any young person to be alone. Not now.” He started walking with me down along the path that wound its way toward Colette’s grave, Viggo’s one long stride matching

three of mine. “Mr. Jessie has not said anything to me, but it is my opinion that the man who is snatching the children must be a wampire.”

A shiver ran up my spine, and I couldn’t help but glance around the cemetery. “Do you really think so?” I asked with a gulp.

Viggo gave me a solemn nod. “I believe it is the only way that there could be no clues and no evidence to follow. I think there must be a member of the undead who has moved into town to feast.”

“But why teenagers?” I asked. “Why target kids in high school?”

“I am sure their blood must taste better than that of a vagrant,” Viggo said in a matter-of-fact tone. “A young child does not have much blood. A teenager is almost fully grown, but the blood is still fresh. Maybe that is why.” And giving it some additional thought, he added in an offhanded way, “Or maybe it is someone with a grudge against the Wanderlinds who is trying to make trouble.”

I was definitely glad Viggo had decided to escort me across the graveyard. He had a lot of experience around vampires, so if he thought that was who was snatching teenagers off the street, then I tended to believe him. I had to wonder if Jessie harbored the same suspicions and was concealing them from me for some reason or if he was just in denial.

We turned off the path and started heading over a slight rise. I didn’t know if it was something natural in the land formation or some type of landscaping the cemetery had put in years ago for aesthetic appeal. When we reached the top of the rise, we could see the chairs and flowers still arranged around the Gibson family plot. “I shall wait here to give you some privacy,” Viggo said, stopping by a large marble urn.

“Thank you,” I said, giving his arm a quick squeeze before continuing across the lawn.

“My pleasure,” he said in return. “Shall I tell Gloria that you said hello?”

“Oh.” I felt a flash of embarrassment for not having asked about her. “Yes, please. How is she, by the way?”



“We are both very happy thanks to you, Miss Aurora. We can never thank you enough for what you did for us.”

“I’m glad it’s all working out,” I assured him. He’d thanked me so many times that to thank me again was really unnecessary. And it was Jessie, after all, who had bought out Gloria’s debt from the Csorbo family. I wasn’t sure that leaving one vampire family to work as a servant for another was much of an improvement, but at least Gloria got to be with the giant she loved.

At first I couldn’t see Jessie amongst the small clutter around the grave. I wondered if I’d missed him and he’d flown home, forgetting to tell Viggo. As I drew closer, I spied the umbrella on the ground where I’d left it, so that was at least a good thing. I bent to pick it up, and when I raised my head, I saw a figure dressed all in black standing by the grave. “Jessie,” I breathed in a voice just audible above a whisper.

## Chapter 17

When I said Jessie's name, he didn't turn to face me, but I could tell from a small movement of his head that he knew I was there. I stood perfectly still for a few seconds, wondering if I was intruding. He looked so forlorn, his long coat flapping around his legs, his hair being ruffled in a cold wind that had picked up as night fell. He had one hand stuffed deep in his coat pocket; the other clutched a bouquet of white roses.

"I didn't know the traditional flowers for mourning," he said, still not turning in my direction. "Lilies maybe. I thought it was something white."

"The florist would have probably known," I told him.

Jessie slowly shook his head. "No, I didn't want to bring a stranger into my grief."

"The roses are lovely," I told him, mostly because I couldn't think of anything else to say. "I'm sure Colette would have appreciated them."

He looked down at the bouquet, seemingly surprised to find it still clutched in his hand. "I can't remember her favorite flower anymore," he said, bending to place the roses reverently against the new headstone. "I thought I would always remember everything about her, but some of the details are starting to fade."

"Wildflowers," I said without hesitation. "She loved wildflowers."

Jessie jerked up to a standing position, staring at me. In a few quick strides he was directly in front of me. "How do you know that?" he asked, his voice both demanding and urgent.

"I ..." I stammered, surprised by his behavior. "I remember you told me she used to pick flowers for your brother. The one with hemophilia that your family made up so you could get blood donations."

"Oh," he said, his eyebrows pulled down into a dark V of disappointment.

"And I dream about them sometimes," I added in a hesitating voice. "The flowers, I mean. When I have those recurring dreams. The memories that aren't mine. Most the time I dream of the woods from the night Colette died." Jessie flinched a little, and I fought back the memory of it being him who pushed me into the pit at the building site. "But sometimes there are nice dreams. I'm in a pretty dress; the sun is shining; and I'm gathering wildflowers. I'm really happy and ..." I remembered the dream I had right before Mom woke me up to tell me that they had discovered Colette's body. "And sometimes you're there."

"That couldn't possibly be me. She must have been with somebody else. I can never enjoy the sunshine again." He shook his head. "Never."

"No, it's definitely you," I assured him. "I don't think it's so much a memory of you as it's her daydream. One she used to have about you."

"Are you saying ...?" This time Jessie's eyebrows rose high on his forehead, making a tepee. "Do you really think that you and Colette ...?" He took my face in both his hands and stared into my eyes, searching for a glimmer of somebody else. "Do you think she's you?" he finally asked. "I mean, did you used to be her?"

"I don't think so," I said, turning my eyes away and feeling a painful stab in my heart. He didn't love me. He only cared for me in the hope that I was somehow the reincarnation of his lost love.

Jessie released me and let his head hang. "I'm sorry," he said. "That was an unfair question to ask. I just get so confused sometimes. You are so much like her in so many ways, but also completely different."

“It’s okay,” I told him, reaching out to press him on the forearm. I loved Jessie with every fiber of my being, but Colette would always be the specter standing between us. It was something I had to accept.

He stood there, staring at his boots, grief pressing down on him. “Do you think it’s a betrayal?” he wanted to know.

“What?” I asked, trying to keep the tremble out of my voice even though my heart was breaking.

“Me loving you the way I do?” he said softly, still not looking up. “Do you think if Colette knew that I loved you it would hurt her?”

I went from the verge of despair to sheer joy. “You love me?” I stammered. “Even though I’m not Colette?”

Jessie finally raised his head and looked deep into my eyes. “How can you even ask me such a thing?” he asked. Stepping forward, bridging the small gap between us, he wrapped me in his arms and then sank to his knees, the side of his face pressed against my chest. “I love you so desperately it makes me feel guilty, as if I’m being disloyal to Colette.”

Tears sprang to my eyes, and I blinked rapidly to fight them away. I inhaled deeply, trying to commit the moment to memory. I wanted to tattoo it on my brain so it would be there forever. He loved me. He loved me as much as I loved him. I couldn’t blame him for still loving Colette. We all had a past, and Colette was part of his. It would be weird if he’d just stopped loving her after we met. I didn’t want to erase her from his life. But I did want him to love me passionately because that was the way I loved him.

When I found my voice, I said, “I think Colette would want you to be happy. Everything I know about her makes me think she was a kind and generous person. She wouldn’t want you to be miserable for an eternity. She’d want you to find happiness.” A few teardrops leaked from my eyes and splashed onto his hair.

“You make me happy,” he whispered, his words muffled in my bosom. “You make me the happiest I’ve been in eighty years.”

I bent my head and pressed my face into his dark hair, not feeling the cold wind that was whipping across the cemetery, not thinking that I had to

text my mother and tell her all was well, just savoring a perfect moment with the vampire I loved.

A melodious ringing of bells brought us to our senses. We both looked up. “Mr. Wanderlind,” Viggo said, crossing the lawn quickly with his lengthy strides. “I think that is the signal when the cemetery would like to close.”

We quickly broke apart, and Jessie got to his feet. “Thank you, Viggo,” he said. If vampires could blush, I swear he would have been blushing.

“Shall you escort Miss Aurora home, or vill you be needing my services additionally this evening?” the giant asked.

Jessie glanced at me and immediately understood the eager look upon my face. I really, really, really wanted to be escorted home. “I’ll escort Miss Aurora, Viggo,” he said. “You may take the car back to the castle.”

“I was hoping to take Gloria out for dinner and a late movie,” Viggo said, a question left hanging in the air that I wasn’t quite picking up on.

But Jessie understood. “Oh, well then, of course, you must borrow the car, by all means. Have to treat your lady right,” he said with a small smile while reaching for my hand to give it a squeeze.

“Thank you very much, Mr. Wanderlind. Good night, Miss Aurora,” Viggo said with a rumble before turning and striding off back toward the parking lot. I felt sorry for any lingering visitors who might encounter him in the dark. It would be startling. He really was surprisingly massive.

As soon as the giant was out of hearing distance, Jessie released a small chuckle. “Poor fellow. He’s too big to fit in any of the modern cars. Quite honestly, I think my mother would be happy to get rid of the old Rolls, but I don’t know how Viggo would get anywhere if we did.”

The bells chimed again. “Are you ready to go, or would you like another minute?” I asked. I really needed to text my mom.

“I would like a few more moments, if you don’t mind,” he told me.

“Of course,” I said, immediately heading away from the grave. “I’ll just wait for you over here.” I pointed vaguely toward the edge of the chairs. I began to wonder if they were going to be left out all night.

Pulling out my phone, I turned my back to Jessie to give him some privacy. I texted my mom a quick message. "Found the umbrella. Am safe. Heading home in a minute. Might have Jessie over if that's okay."

My mom must have been staring at her phone at that exact moment because she answered my message almost immediately. "Lock your doors. Can he come over tomorrow instead? I'm tired."

I was disappointed, but I couldn't blame my mom for being tired. It had been a long and emotionally draining day. "Okay," I texted back before slipping my phone back in my bag. Or at least trying to put it in my bag. I somehow missed the opening completely, and my cell slipped out onto the damp, mushy grass. Snatching it off the ground, I immediately started rubbing it on my skirt to dry it. The lawn wasn't super wet, but still, best to be careful. I really couldn't afford another one. When I looked up again, something caught my attention out of the corner of my eye. It was the weird old man again, the one I had caught a glimpse of the other evening while driving home through the snow. He was standing in between the tombstones, staring at me, with a look of pure disgust etched across his face. There was something else about his appearance that didn't look right. He was old and wrinkled but also somehow young. He looked like when a special effects artist puts old-age makeup on a young person. You can always still see a youthfulness underneath.

There was something else odd about him. A distinguishing characteristic that I hadn't been able to see the other night. He had a rather ugly scar that slashed through his left eyebrow and down his cheek. It was definitely not an asset to his already sinister face.

"Hello?" I said in a tentative voice while inching backward toward Jessie. The man made me nervous, and I felt it was too much of a coincidence that I would see him twice in such a short period of time. "Can I help you with something?"

The fact that I had addressed him seemed to infuriate the old man even more. I could practically feel a putrid bile of hate bubbling out of him. I turned my head briefly to get an idea of how much space there was between Jessie and me, but in the half a second I had my head turned away, the old man disappeared. It wasn't like he stepped behind a gravestone or anything; it was like he simply melted into the night.

Feeling more than a little frightened, I hurried over to where Jessie kneeled by Colette's grave. I hated to intrude, so I didn't say anything to interrupt him, but I did stand much closer than I would have if there wasn't a creepy old dude glaring at me and then vanishing.

Jessie's hair was tousled in the wind that had kicked up as night fell. I knew vampires didn't really feel the cold, but the way he was kneeling there, half bent over with pain, gave the impression of him shivering against the dark. I turned my back to him again, feeling like I was an unwilling eavesdropper on an intimate conversation.

"Goodbye, my darling," I heard him say in a soft voice as he got to his feet. "Sleep well."





## Chapter 18

A moment later, Jessie had left the graveside and was offering me his arm. “May I escort you to your car?” he said in a gallant attempt to shake off his pain. I could tell by the tight expression on his face that it was taking some effort on his part.

“Please,” was my response as I hooked my arm through his. We took a few steps before I remembered my reason for actually visiting the cemetery so late in the day. “Wait a minute.” I scampered back to the chairs to snatch up the umbrella and then join him again.

I didn’t say anything to Jessie about the old man until we were in the car and were on our way back to my house. Jessie had offered to drive. There was something about my old VW bug that amused him. But once he’d had a little time to collect himself, I asked, “Are there any other vampires in the area?” When he gave me a perplexed look, I added. “I mean, besides your family.”

“I don’t think so,” he said, shaking his head slightly but keeping his eyes on the road. “My cousin Dorian will be here for the holidays, but he hasn’t arrived yet as far as I know. Why do you ask?”

I told him about the weird-looking old man who had been glaring at me. The corners of Jessie’s mouth pulled down more and more as I described him. He blinked several times when I mentioned the scar. “Does he sound familiar to you at all?” I asked. “I mean, I don’t know for sure that he’s a vampire, but you know ...” My words drifted off, and I felt a flash of embarrassment—like I was paranormal profiling or something.

“No,” Jessie said rather abruptly. He shook his head back and forth quite rapidly as if trying to drive an idea out of his head. “He couldn’t ... I mean, no.”

“So he does sound like someone you know?” I asked, a little surprised by his reaction.

“No,” he said again, but it almost sounded as if he was trying to convince himself. “I know of no one living or undead that matches that

description,” he said firmly.

Jessie drove for a few more minutes in silence, frowning to himself. He was gripping the steering wheel so tightly that the knuckles of his already pale skin were almost white. Then, only a few blocks from my house, he pulled to the side of the road. When I gave him a questioning look, he said, “I’d better get out here. I’ll see you safely home, of course, but I’m sure your mother won’t be expecting me in your car.”

He was right. I knew he was right, but my heart gave a little wrench in my chest as I thought of being parted from him. “Will you come see me in a few hours?” I asked. “After my mom thinks I’ve gone to bed.”

He was about to say no. I could see the words forming on his lips. I stopped him by grabbing him by the lapels and kissing him quite fiercely. “Please?” I said in a husky whisper.

“Yes,” he said once I’d pulled away. “I’ll come by. I would very much like to spend more time with you this night, if that’s okay.”

Jessie had no idea how okay that was with me. It had been a tiring day, but kissing him fired up my hormones again. My heart began pounding a heavy beat in my chest at the thought of luring him into my room. “Okay,” I told him. “But meet me at our window. I’m sure my mom’s tired, and she probably won’t want guests. I’ll just tell her I’m going to bed early.”

Jessie got out of the car, and I fumbled my way over the gearshift to the driver’s seat. He waited patiently for me to be settled and belted in before leaning down and planting an electrifying kiss on my lips. “I’ll follow you home, but keep your doors locked,” he told me.

“Always,” was my reply.

After kissing me again, he added, “I’ll see you in a few hours.”

“Wait,” I said, tugging at his hand. “You’re not going to blow me off like you did last night. Are you?”

“No,” he assured me. “And I’m sorry about that. I meant to apologize earlier, but my mind was so cluttered with everything.” He gestured vaguely toward the way we had just driven. “I really didn’t mean to stand you up, but there’s been some tension at home between my brother and me. I really

don't understand what's going on with him, but my mom made us talk it out. By the time we finished up, it was too late to meet you. Or even call."

Jessie's brother, Daniel, was, in my opinion, a complete jerk. But it did strike me as amusing that two men who had been on the planet for over eight decades still had to have their mother settle their arguments. Being an only child, I didn't know much about sibling rivalry, but I guess it ran pretty strong sometimes. "I forgive you," I said, suppressing a smirk. "But please, don't do it again."

"I will do my very best," he promised before leaning in through the window to bestow me with another lingering kiss before launching into the sky and disappearing from view.

I gave myself a few seconds to relish the kiss and make sure my hands were steady before I started driving. Jessie's kisses were dizzying, to say the least.

When I finally walked in the door, I could tell my mom had been worrying. She immediately gave me a hug and said, "I should have just gone with you. It's not like I got any work done, anyway."

"I was fine," I told her, returning her squeeze. "I know there's a weirdo out there, but I really can't always stay locked in the house after dark, you know."

"I know," she said, reluctantly releasing me, "but you can at least spare me the worry by not going anywhere by yourself at night until they discover what happened to those poor children."

It seemed like a reasonable request, so I said, "I promise."

Mom had made mac 'n' cheese for dinner. Afterward, we hung out on the couch watching TV for a little while before I faked a few yawns and said, "I'm pretty beat. Think I'll just go read a little before bed."

"Good night, sweetie," she said, kissing me on my forehead. I had to force myself not to scamper upstairs in my excitement for Jessie's arrival.

It wasn't that I exactly planned to seduce Jessie. We had just buried Colette, so it would be weird to greet him in just panties and a bra. But I did

have a strong desire to lure him into my bedroom and keep him there as long as possible. When he'd kneeled on the ground and buried his face in my chest, my nipples had grown hard despite the fact that I was trying to comfort him. I knew that probably wasn't appropriate, but I was a teenager and I had hormones.

I brushed out my hair, freshened my makeup while trying to make it look as invisible as possible, and then put on my prettiest nightie and robe. I didn't exactly have anything sexy to wear, but it wasn't exactly sex that I was after. At least for the moment. I guess I wanted intimacy. I wanted to hold him and touch him and feel his weight on top of me.

It felt like it took forever, but Jessie was finally tapping at my window. I sprang out of bed and rushed over to let him in. Once the window was open, I could see him drawing breath to protest entering my bedroom. Instead of arguing with him, I just grabbed him by the lapels of his coat and dragged him inside.

"Good evening," he said, a bit surprised.

"Mr. Vanderlind," I whispered, lifting my arms up to drape around his neck.

He kissed me, his arms wrapped so tightly around my waist that I was lifted from the floor. "I know it's only been a few hours, but it seems like it's been forever," he murmured in my ear. Then he deftly scooped up my legs and turned me so I was held like a bride being carried over the threshold. Then, with great care, he laid me on the bed. "Oh, Aurora," he said with a soft moan as he pulled himself on top of me, pressing every inch of his body against mine.

"Jessie," I whispered back, my body straining against his. I could tell that he wanted me, and it stoked the fire that was already burning deep inside of me. He kissed me deeply, his tongue parting my lips and dipping into my mouth. I writhed beneath him, fully feeling how much he wanted me.

His kisses descended to my chin, my throat, my breastbone. He nuzzled my breasts and then turned his head to rest upon my chest for a moment. "I can hear your heart beating," he said, and I felt his words rumble in my ribcage. He slid his hands underneath me, so he was almost cradling me in

his arms. His weight became less as he supported both of our bodies, although the right side of his face still pressed against me. “I know you probably don’t fully understand what I’m talking about, but this is such a wonderful sound,” Jessie whispered. I couldn’t see his face, but I could tell by the angle of his long eyelashes that his eyes were closed. “Being with you tonight is wonderful,” he said, his voice barely audible. “It’s amazing to me that there can be any joy in this miserable day.”

After that, he became very still; his breathing grew steady. I had thought he was just taking a moment, but as the time stretched longer and longer, I went from eager and lustful to slight confusion. What was he doing?

Jessie had told me once that vampires don’t sleep. He’d described the state they’re in while reclining in their coffins as more like being unconscious than any type of dream world. That’s why his behavior was so peculiar. If he wasn’t sleeping, I had no idea what he was doing.

As my libido calmed down, I became sleepy too. I wasn’t exactly warm in his arms—in fact, I was on the chilly side—but there was no place in the world I would rather have been. Eventually, I found my eyelids had become heavy.

“Aurora,” Jessie whispered. I couldn’t tell if I was asleep or awake. I had dreamed of Jessie so many times that I half convinced myself I was having some type of fantasy.

“Yes?” I finally managed to say when I felt him shifting above me and realized he was actually in bed with me.

“It’s almost dawn,” he said, trying to gently pull away from me.

I let out a small whimper and tried to keep him close. “So?” I said, a slight pout to my voice.

“I have to go home.” He managed to pull himself away and get to his feet.

“What happened last night?” I asked, still groggy. But the memory of the passion that had quickly faded to napping immediately popped back into my brain. “I thought we ...” I paused, not sure if I should feel embarrassed, or maybe even a little hurt. “I thought you ...”

“What is it, darling?” Jessie asked, sitting back down and reaching for my hand. He pressed it to his lips.

Turning my face away from him, I managed to stammer, “I thought you wanted me.”

“Aurora,” he said, taking me in his arms. “You have no idea how much I want you. In fact, it would be ungentlemanly of me to say how much.” He kissed my forehead and then the lids of my eyes. “But yesterday was a very difficult day. I was awake all day in my coffin thinking how much I hated not being able to attend Colette’s service. And then the conflict of seeing you and missing her and trying to find out about ...” His words trailed off. “Well, that doesn’t matter right now, but when I took you in my arms, I felt passion coursing through me. I wanted you, every bit of you. I wanted to devour you in every sense of the word,” he told me. “But somehow, the beating of your heart mesmerized me. It’s the most beautiful sound in the world to me. I’ve just been lying here for the past several hours listening to your heart beat. It was so peaceful, so hypnotic to me.” He let out a small, rueful laugh. “It’s the closest I’ve come to sleeping in the last eighty years.”

## Chapter 19

I hadn't had a shift at the cafe in so long, it took me a little bit to get back in the groove of working. But it felt good—waiting on customers, earning money. I couldn't tell if it was because the holidays were barreling down on us or because my family had been having a rough time, but the tips were slightly heavier than usual. A group of kids from my class came in, which always made me feel a little awkward, but none of them were acting all superior because I was behind the counter and they were in front of it, so that was a nice change.

One thing about working at a popular small town cafe is that you hear all the local news first hand. Two women came in for coffee and sat at the counter for a chat. I didn't really know them beyond serving them cappuccinos fairly frequently, but I had figured out from hearing large amounts of their conversation that the redhead was named Carol and the blonde was called Beth. They'd gone to high school together and been best

friends ever since. Seeing that they appeared to be in their forties, that was an impressive chunk of time. One of the things that appeared to glue their friendship together was a mutual love of gossip.

Once they were seated, after doctoring their drinks with various creams and sweeteners, Carol said, “Did you hear that old Mervin is MIA?”

“The taxi driver?” Beth asked, licking a bit of foam from her lip.

Mervin was Tiburon’s sole taxi driver. He was quite elderly and always in a bad mood, but he was on call twenty-four seven to drive passengers anywhere they wanted to go, as long as it wasn’t too far outside of Tiburon. It usually took him forever to show up, and the ride was never pleasant, but he always got you to your destination. Mervin wasn’t an official taxi driver or anything. He just called himself a taxi driver and drove an old car that he’d spray painted yellow.

Carol continued. “Well, apparently the police found his car on the side of the road on seventy-one south last night, but with nobody in it.”

“You’re kidding,” Beth gasped.

Carol shook her head adamantly to show that she was not kidding. “At first, they thought maybe the car had broken down and cranky old Mervin had just walked home or to a diner or something. But the keys were still in the car, and the engine was running.”

“That doesn’t sound good,” Beth commented.

“I know,” Carol said. “They searched the area, thinking maybe he had a heart attack or something and staggered out of his cab. Or maybe stopped to help someone along the road. But there was no sign of him anywhere.”

“You’re kidding.” Beth said again. “That’s so bizarre.”

“I know,” Carol replied, her eyes round with the titillating horror of it. “He simply vanished. It’s like he was plucked off the ground and whisked away into the sky or something.”

I had been drying mugs and found myself pausing to listen. The more they talked, the more my stomach clenched.

“Maybe it was the same weirdo that got those kids that are missing,” Carol said.



“Maybe it was aliens?” Beth suggested. “Maybe they just beamed him up or something.”

“There’s no such thing as aliens,” her friend insisted, all but scoffing at her.

“I don’t know,” Beth said with a shrug, “I think there are a lot more weird and dangerous things out there than we realize.”

“Joe, I need to go on my break,” I said when I realized my hands were shaking. Before he could answer, I hurried out back where only the staff who smoked usually hung out. I had this wild idea that I might actually throw up and eyed the dumpster as a possible place to leave my breakfast.

There was a vampire loose on the streets of Tiburon, snatching people right out of their cars. It had to be a vampire. There was no other explanation. It had to have been the crazy old man that I saw. I wasn’t an expert at identifying the undead, but I was pretty damn sure he was one. I had to wonder if Jessie knew him. Was that why he acted so funny when I described the guy?

I felt my body start to tremble, and I looked around as if I thought some bloodsucker was going to attack me in broad daylight. I was being foolish. I knew I was being foolish, but that didn’t stop me from being afraid. If my suspicions were true and the old man was a vampire, and one that Jessie knew, then why had my boyfriend lied to me?

By the end of my double shift, it was already growing dark. I was feeling calmer. Definitely not happy, but calmer. I knew Jessie loved me. I knew he would willingly sacrifice his life to save mine. But why would he not tell me about the vampire? If the old coot actually was a vampire. Maybe I was just being paranoid because I knew vampires existed and therefore every weirdo with a menacing face appeared to be a vampire to me. I was too exhausted to think about it anymore.

There had been a few mix-ups while I was working. It was my fault; I had gotten some orders wrong. Joe was not thrilled with me, but instead of yelling, he put his arm around my shoulder, gave me a little squeeze, and said, “Maybe having you in to work today was a bad idea. You’ve been through a lot lately.”

“I’m sorry,” I told him. “I’m just a little distracted. I’ll pull it together.”

“I know you will,” he said, as if it never occurred to him that I would do otherwise.

“Joe, I know this is going to sound silly, but would you please watch to make sure I get to my car safely?” I asked.

“That’s not silly,” he told me. “Never be embarrassed for taking precautions. There’s some nut job out there. If you weren’t at least a little nervous, I would think there was something wrong with you.”

I was jittery driving home. I kept glancing around at the sky, wondering if some weirdo was going to come diving out of nowhere and snatch me off the face of the earth, never to be heard from again. I was thrilled when I got back into the house and had the doors locked. Yes, Jessie could enter our home, but it was comforting to know that no other member of the undead could enter without a proper invitation. And fortunately, my mom had never been keen on inviting strangers into the house.

I was very restless that evening. I kept thinking I heard the phone ring or someone knocking at the door, but it was always just my imagination. I really, really, really wanted to hear from Jessie but was reluctant to call him. He was my boyfriend; we were in love; I had every right to call if I wanted to; but still, I felt weird about it. Mostly because he lived at the castle. I didn’t know if it was Viggo’s job to answer the phone. I liked the giant and didn’t mind talking to him. But the idea that his mom might answer made me feel awkward, and the idea that his jerky brother, Daniel, might answer made me feel mega-uncomfortable. Especially if he and Jessie had been fighting lately. For the zillionth time, I wished that Jessie had a cell phone so I could call him on a whim like normal people do. And I’d have to find out if there was any type of signal booster that I could afford so that maybe, just maybe, he could get a signal in that stone fortress where he lived.

I climbed into bed later still feeling weird and longing for Jessie. I had quickly become addicted to hearing from him every night, but it was close to midnight and he still hadn’t come by, so I knew there was no chance. He was too polite to disturb me past ten o’clock.

I wish I was the kind of person who sleeps soundly, who could just close my eyes and lay my head on the pillow, drifting off peacefully into a

world of dreamless sleep. Unfortunately, that's not me. I've never been good at sleeping. My dreams are too vivid and frequently frightening to make sleeping an enjoyable thing. That was one of the reasons I started a dream journal. That and to try to make sense of the dreams that might have been Colette's memories. I'd kept the journal for months now, but it didn't make anything any clearer.

Learning that vampires existed also had not helped me when I tried to catch a solid eight hours. In fact, having Jessie in my life had the exact opposite effect. Yes, there were many nights when I lay awake, twisting around in the sheets thinking of his body pressed against mine, but that wasn't the problem. I could handle sleep loss due to lust. What was really dragging me down for the moment was waking up repeatedly during the night, convinced that the creepy scar-faced vampire had somehow entered our home and was after me. Or worse, had somehow gotten to my mom. The dreams got so bad that I actually got out of bed and crept down the hall, hovering outside my mother's bedroom until I convinced myself that the sound of heavy breathing on the other side of the closed door was actually her.

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Trying to get to the mall on the eve of Christmas Eve is like ... trying to drive anywhere in Los Angeles on a regular day. Actually, I wasn't sure about that. I'd never been to LA, but from everything I'd seen on the news, it looked pretty bad. Either way, there was a huge snarl of traffic surrounding the Tiburon Mall, and it wasn't moving anywhere any time soon. I had thought getting up early enough to hit the mall in the first hour it was open would have been sufficient to avoid the crowds, but I guess I should have camped out, warming my hands over a fire in a metal barrel like a movie hobo or something.

Finally, I just gave up and turned down a side street when I had the opportunity. I drove for about ten blocks before I found a place to park. As I got out and started trudging back toward the mall, it began to snow. Because of the deceptive lack of snow when I started out for the mall, I

hadn't anticipated it being cold out, and I didn't dress in enough layers. I pulled up my hood and struggled to button the top button on my coat.

I had foolishly assumed that last-minute shoppers would be focused on grabbing random sweaters or duking it out in the toy store. It didn't make sense to me that everyone within a fifty-mile radius of Tiburon would wait until the last minute to buy a cell phone. The store actually had a sign-up sheet where you would leave your name and cell phone number so you could shop elsewhere while waiting. It was a pretty considerate thing to do, seeing that I had to wait in line behind seven people to even sign the sheet. I guess their idea would keep the fist fighting to a minimum. People can get pretty rabid about line cutters around the holidays.

Four hours later, I was trudging through the snow back to the car feeling like a Viking after a successful hunt. I had acquired a smartphone, a service package, and the cheapest signal booster they had. I'd purchased the bare bones, most basic service plan they had, but had still gone way over our agreed-to budget. After all the ridiculously expensive gifts he had given me in the past, he was just going to have to deal with it.

As I sat in my bug, letting it warm up, my own cell rang. It was Blossom. "Hey," I said. "What's going on?"

"What do you mean 'What's going on?' What does that mean?" she said, obviously annoyed.

"Uh ..." I seriously had no idea what she was expecting.

"Are you my best friend or not?" she demanded.

"Yes," I said, without hesitation. "I am your best friend. Is this a quiz or something?"

"No," she answered, sounding miffed. "I was just wondering why you weren't over here helping me bake cookies and get ready for the party. Like we do every year. Or aren't you coming?"

"Oh!" I exclaimed, banging myself on the forehead. "I'm sorry. I've just had a really hellish time at the mall and barely escaped with my life. I'm heading to your place right now."

My excuse seemed to mollify her. "Okay," she said. "I'll see you in a little bit."

I actually really wanted to go home and lie down. Christmas shopping was always bizarrely draining. Plus, it was really bothering me that I hadn't heard from Jessie. Was there something wrong, or was I just being paranoid?

When I got to Blossom's house, she flung open the door and then bolted back into the kitchen. The smoke detector was going off, and a billow of black smoke was rolling out of the kitchen and starting to fill the hallway. I charged after Blossom, immediately pulling the collar of my coat to cover my mouth. I didn't know if we were dealing with an actual fire or just some over-toasted holiday cheer.

When I charged into the kitchen, I saw Blossom pulling out of the oven a cookie sheet that held smoking bits of charcoal I assumed had been sugar cookies in a previous life. When she shoved the tray into the sink, I shouted at her, "No! Outside. Take them outside. Go out the back." I immediately wrenched open the Costers' back door so she would have an easier time.

After Blossom rushed past me, I opened the kitchen window and a few others in the adjacent rooms. It was freezing out and a bit of snow drifted in, but I didn't know of any other way to clear the smoke.

Blossom came back in with the empty cookie tray. I assumed she'd dumped the smoldering bits of coal into the snow. "Can you see why I need your assistance here?" she demanded, as if it was my fault she let the cookies burn.

I nodded at her. "You never do like using a timer, do you?"

Rolling her eyes, Blossom responded, "It's not that I don't like using a timer, it's that I forget to use the timer. It's your job to remind me."

"Knock, knock." We heard the sound of a female voice calling from the front door. I'd left it open when I'd seen the smoke.

I turned to look at Blossom and she shrugged. "When you didn't show up this morning, I called Sheila."

"Great," I grumbled at her. "You could have just called me earlier."

"I know, but I was feeling vulnerable because you've been blowing me off lately." Blossom said it in a fake pouty voice, but I knew there was some truth behind it.

Baking and decorating sugar cookies actually turned out to be fun, even with Sheila there. I was expecting a constant flow of snarkiness directed at me, but there really wasn't that much. But Sheila apparently did have something against a girl in our class named Haley Scott. "She is such a mega-slut," Sheila said, warming to her task of tearing into the girl.

"Haley?" Blossom asked, wrinkling her nose in disbelief as she shook red sprinkles over a row of candy cane cookies. "Are you sure about that? I'd be more willing to believe she's Amish than someone who sleeps around."

I had to agree with Blossom. I didn't know Haley Scott very well, but she appeared to be a shy girl who dressed fairly conservatively and pretty much kept to herself. "Who does she sleep with?" I asked as I spread a thick layer of white frosting across the belly of a snowman cookie. Any of those terms like "sleeps around" or "gets around" or "puts out" really bothered me because they're all about slut-shaming the girl while leaving any boys potentially involved as completely anonymous.

"Lots of guys," Sheila said, helping herself to a handful of chocolate chips.

I wasn't going to let her off that easily, so I prodded her. "Yeah, but who specifically?"

"Oh, I don't know," Sheila said. I could tell she was annoyed I was pushing her for details, but she was the one slandering another girl. "Tommy Sherman says she's pretty much there whenever he wants it. It's like ordering a pizza."

"Tommy Sherman?" Blossom said, doing little to hide her disbelief. "I seriously doubt that."

Tommy Sherman was on the verge of handsome. He was the star of the basketball team and really popular. But given both their social standings, I seriously doubted that he and Haley had ever been alone in the same room together, let alone had sex. "Are you sure she's just not his math tutor or something?" I asked. As far as I knew, Haley was wicked smart. "I seriously doubt Haley would go for a guy like Tommy Sherman."

Sheila shrugged. "That's not what Tommy says."

I knew that high school boys were more than likely lying about any sexual conquest they were bragging about. It did surprise me that Sheila didn't realize that boys would lie about that kind of stuff. "I'm sure he's exaggerating," I said, picking up a tube of green frosting to add some stripes to a couple of Christmas ornament cookies.

"Well, what about you?" Sheila said, going on the offensive. "Where's this magically delicious Vanderlind boyfriend that we've heard so much about?"

That's what I got for trying to defend Haley. Sheila wouldn't dare get angry with Blossom, who was also calling her on her slut-shaming, but she had no problem with targeting me. Blossom immediately tried to come to my aid by saying "She doesn't always talk about him," but that only made Sheila focus on me more.

"Seriously, Aurora. Where is Mr. Wonderful? Is he coming to Blossom's party, or will there be a last-minute excuse?"

"What are you trying to say?" I asked, resisting the urge to squirt the green frosting in her face.

"I'm saying that you accuse Tommy of lying, but you're not so handy with the truth yourself. Are you?"

"She's not making it up," Blossom protested, outraged on my behalf.

Sheila swung around to look at her. "Oh? And have you seen this mysterious Vanderlind boyfriend?"

"No," Blossom had to admit, "but I've been standing right next to her when she's called the castle."

"But you've never actually met him?" Sheila pressed, a look of triumph flashing in her eyes. "So, tell us, Aurora," she said, swinging back around on me. "Is this boy like an imaginary friend? You totally think he's real, but the rest of us can't see him?"

I wondered, and not for the first time, why Blossom chose to hang out with someone as nasty as Sheila. Their friendship was sporadic. Blossom

would at some point get sick of her bitchiness and blow Sheila off for a while, but they always drifted back together again.

“Well?” Sheila said, interrupting my ruminating.

“He’s coming to the party,” I said as matter-of-factly as I could muster. “It’s not a big deal.” I started frosting again.

“Sure it’s not,” she said with a significant eye roll. I guess she could sense the chronic insecurity just hanging off of me.

Thankfully, Blossom was able to turn the conversation away to less volatile topics after that. I tried to participate and sound light hearted, but in the back of my brain I was constantly thinking *How the hell am I going to get my vampire boyfriend to Blossom’s Christmas Eve party?*

By the end of the day, I was sticky with frosting and feeling slightly sick to my stomach. I tried to blame it on all the sweets I had been sampling for the last several hours, but part of it was dreading the call I was going to have to make after the sun was fully down.





## Chapter 20

I drove home as the sun started to set, forcing myself to focus on the road. It was tempting either to keep constantly scanning the sky for hostile bloodsuckers or to sit for two cycles of a red light, chewing my lip and wondering what was going on with Jessie.

By the time I pulled in the garage, I had psyched myself up to calling him. He was my boyfriend, after all. I didn't want to be one of those girlfriends who were too clingy and needed constant attention, but I was entitled to call him once in a while. Wasn't I?

Even with all my mental prep, I waited a good forty-five minutes before picking up the phone. I didn't like when people called me first thing when I got up in the morning, so I figured the same held true for vampires when they first got up at night.

Once I couldn't think of any other excuse not to call, I pulled out my cell and hit Jessie's number.

"Wanderlind Castle," Viggo answered.

"Hi, Viggo. It's Aurora," I said, knowing my voice sounded way too chipper.

"Miss Aurora, it is nice to hear from you. Would you like to speak to Mr. Jessie?" he wanted to know.

"Yes, please," I told him, my foot tapping out an involuntary tempo.

"Please hold," Viggo said, and then I heard him put the phone down.

The castle was large. Castle size, in fact. And I didn't think they had any kind of intercom system or anything, so it didn't surprise me that I was left waiting for a good five minutes before I heard Jessie's melodious voice. "Hello?" he said. "Aurora?"

"Hi," I said, trying not to sound breathless.

"Is anything wrong?" he asked immediately.

"No," I told him. "Why?"

“I was just wondering why you called.” His voice sounded guarded.

“Um, Jessie ...?” I said. “It’s perfectly normal in this century for a girl to call her boyfriend. You realize that, don’t you?”

I heard a different male voice in the background say, “Is that the girl?”

“Aurora,” Jessie said. “Would you please hold the line for a moment?” Before I could answer, I heard the phone being muffled against something, probably his chest. There was a brief conversation between Jessie and the unidentified male, but I couldn’t make it out. After a few moments, he came back online and said, “Okay, I’m listening.” I knew he wasn’t really listening.

“Blossom’s Christmas party is tomorrow night,” I told him, deciding to forego repeating the explanation as to how the reason I called was because we were in a relationship and it was perfectly acceptable for me to call. “It’s outside, so there won’t be any problems about an invitation,” I hurriedly added before he had time to protest. “I was just wondering if we’ll be going to the party together or what?” I couldn’t summon the nerve to ask him if I was still invited to the castle later in the evening. He hadn’t brought it up since first mentioning it.

“Aurora, I don’t think it’s advisable for you to go out after sunset right now,” Jessie said, his voice strained, letting me surmise that the someone else was still listening. “In fact, I would discourage Blossom from having a party at all.”

When a vampire tells you not to go out at night, it’s usually advisable to listen. And half of my brain was shouting at me, *Listen to him! He obviously knows what he’s talking about.* But the other half of my brain was thinking *Sheila will never let me live this down if I don’t show to the party. She will mock me forever.* It’s absurd to prioritize high school BS over self-preservation, but it was compounded by my feeling insecure about calling and not hearing from him the previous day. And that he’d completely stood me up just the other night. As the icing on my cake of insecurities, there was the fact that someone was eavesdropping on our conversation. I heard the anonymous male voice say, “Oh, let her go to the party. She’s a young girl. She needs to socialize with people her own age.” The voice was as smooth as Jessie’s but with more than a hint of arrogance.

“Jessie,” I said, my voice coming out sharper than I intended. “Would you mind letting me know who else is listening in on our conversation?”

“Oh.” Jessie apparently hadn’t realized that I could hear the commentary on the other end of the line. “My cousin Dorian just arrived, and he has a lot of opinions.” He said the second half of the sentence with significance, and I could tell he was probably shooting the cousin a few daggers with his eyes.

“Okay, fine,” I said with a sigh. All I needed was another Vanderlind who didn’t like me and felt the need to express his opinions. Jessie’s brother was quite enough, as far as I was concerned. “Here’s the deal,” I told him. “I’m going to Blossom’s party tomorrow night. I would really like it if you were there. Hell, you can even bring your cousin, if it’s that big of a deal to you. But just so you know, I’m going to be there.” It was a dirty bit of manipulation on my part. I was pretty confident that if Jessie thought I was in danger, he wouldn’t tolerate me going to the party without him. He would have to attend. I wasn’t proud of myself, but I sure as hell wasn’t going to spend the rest of my high school career being mocked by the likes of Sheila.

I heard the cousin exclaim, “A mortal party? With young people? I haven’t been to one of those in almost a century. Please tell your young mortal that I am RSVPing yes.”

“Aurora,” Jessie said into the phone, and I could tell he was not pleased. “This is a very bad idea.”

“Is that how you treat your mortal?” I heard the silky voice of Jessie’s cousin exclaim in the background. “And this is a modern way to behave?” I could almost hear him rubbing his chin as he thought about it. “Fascinating.”

I felt a wave of remorse wash over me. I had just invited my vampire boyfriend and his cousin, who I had never met but who sounded like a typical arrogant vampire, to my best friend’s Christmas party. There would be dozens of mortal teenagers there. In fact, there would be almost every friend I had at Tiburon High. I was being stupid and pigheaded and selfish. “You’re right,” I said, after a few more seconds of internal struggle. “Forget

I even said anything.” I could suck up being mocked by Sheila. It wouldn’t be the end of the world. Better to keep my friends safe than save my ego.

I heard Jessie exhale a long, quite audible sigh. “No, I understand,” he said. “It’s important to you.” After another long pause, he added, “As long as it’s outside, my cousin and I would be happy to attend.”

“Seriously?” I whispered. I’d already given in. Didn’t he realize he had won?

“Yes, I am being very serious,” Jessie said. “Is it still your intention to attend my mother’s Christmas Eve party once we’ve made an appearance at Blossom’s celebration?” he asked, his voice crisp with irritation.

“I ...” I stammered. What was I about to agree to? Was I that much of an idiot? Was I the kind of girl who puts her friends at risk just to serve her own ego? A little voice in my head said, *Yes. That’s exactly who you are. You’re selfish and insecure. Admit it. Say yes.* “No,” I finally managed to say with a sputter.

“No, you do not intend to spend Christmas Eve at the castle?” he asked, his voice sounding a little hurt.

“No, I’m sorry. That’s not what I meant.” I felt like my tongue was intentionally saying words I didn’t want it to say. I started over. “I would be happy to spend Christmas Eve with you and your family,” I told him. “But we don’t have to go to Blossom’s. I’ll make up an excuse.” I knew I’d have to deal with Sheila’s snarkiness, but that was no excuse for risking Blossom and the rest of my friends.

“I can’t believe you are denying your pet this one small pleasure after all the suffering you’ve caused her,” I heard Dorian say. “And me, too, for that matter. Did it ever occur to you that I might like to attend the party? It’s all I really want for Christmas.” I could tell the vampire was feigning hurt.

“Would you cut it out, already?” Jessie said. I assumed he was addressing his cousin.

“We really don’t have to go,” I repeated. “To Blossom’s, I mean.”

Dorian countered, “Oh, but listen to her. She wants to go so desperately. We really should.”

“The two of you need to stop it right now,” Jessie snarled. “Aurora, we’ll be over to pick you up at half past seven to attend both parties.”

“But ...” I tried to protest.

“I will see you tomorrow,” Jessie said, no longer listening to me. “Good night.” I heard him hang up the phone. It felt rather abrupt.

That did not go at all the way I’d expected. I’d had a complete change of heart and definitely did not want vampires at Blossom’s party. No matter who the vampires happened to be. What if Dorian tried to use his vampire influence over one of the other guests? Vampires had some control over most mortals when they wanted. Their eyes got all intense and fiery, and it felt like the most ridiculous amount of peer pressure imaginable. I had experienced it first hand on more than one occasion, and it was definitely hard to fight off. All you wanted to do was please the vampire, no matter the request. I was going to have to keep a close eye on Dorian for the entire party. Why had I been so foolish as to include him in the invitation? As it was, I felt stupid and selfish for bringing it up in the first place.

Lying in bed that evening, I couldn’t fall asleep. I missed Jessie. I was addicted to having him come by every night. I could feel my body craving to be with him. And sleeping with him had only made my cravings worse. It didn’t matter that we’d only cuddled. The mere touch of his hand or brush of his lips was more thrilling than the intimate kiss of any other boy.

At some point, I abandoned the thought of actually falling asleep and got out of bed to sit by my window with the curtains open, staring out into the dark. I thought of the many nights Jessie had spent sitting on the opposite side of the sill, telling me about his life and me sharing what little there had been of my life to tell. It was so wonderful just to be able to look at him, to reach across the small barrier and touch his arm, to feel him watching me ... I suddenly had the uncomfortable feeling that someone was actually watching me.

I tried not to freeze or frantically whip my head around, not wanting to react and give myself away. Casually, I let my eyes drift from tree to tree. Was someone out there? Was I being observed by a member of the undead? It had happened before, and I definitely had that same creepy feeling.

I strained my ears, listening for any snatch of conversation or the sound of a twig snapping. I was grasping for any indication of where my potential voyeur was perched. I guess I wasn't acting as natural as I hoped and the vampire knew I was on to him because in the blink of an eye, a member of the undead stepped out of the air and onto the porch roof.

I was so startled, I almost fell over backward and had to grip the window sill to keep from shrieking. It was the old man. The one that had been spying on us in the graveyard. He strode directly up to my window and stood there, looking at me. He didn't move like an old man. In fact, he stood tall and moved fluidly. His face was wrinkled yet firm, not sagging like the skin of the elderly. He had a scar that slashed through his left brow and down his cheek. I realized it must have been something he received before being turned. His eyes were dark and shaded by heavy brows, but I could see the intensity underneath, burning like embers at the end of a bonfire. *He's trying to get me under his influence*, I thought and tried to hurriedly turn away, but it was too late. I found that I couldn't move. I could only stare at the young old man.

"You are the companion of Jessie Vanderlind?" the vampire asked, his eyes boring a hole into me.

"No," I told him. I actually didn't want to tell him anything but felt compelled to speak.

"I have seen you together," the vampire insisted. "More than once." His dark eyes became almost red; he was staring at me so intensely. "Are you his companion?"

"No," I said again. I was being truthful, but it took every bit of my strength not to tell him the details of my relationship with Jessie.

The vampire scowled at me. He fidgeted slightly from foot to foot, which somewhere in the back of my brain I knew was uncharacteristic for the undead. "What are you to Jessie Vanderlind if you are not his companion?" he asked.

"I'm his girlfriend," I said. I didn't want to say it, but he obviously wanted to know so badly that the words came sliding out.

"His girlfriend?" the vampire asked, his upper lip curling in disgust. "But you are a mortal. How is that possible?"

“We’re in love,” I told him. It was a simple truth.

The vampire adamantly shook his head. “No!” he said, thumping the window glass and making it vibrate. “I don’t believe you. A Vanderlind would never be with a mortal. Tell me the truth. Tell me how you know Jessie Vanderlind and why you think you’re in love with him.”

I didn’t want to tell him, but I found I couldn’t stop myself. My brain was urging me to just close the curtain and hide in my bed, but my body refused to obey. “Jessie was in love with my great great aunt Colette Gibson, and they were going to be conjoined. But she was killed by another vampire. We met a few months ago and both felt a very strong connection. I frequently have dreams that are probably actually Colette’s memories.” Then I found myself saying something that I had never said out loud before. In fact, it was something I hadn’t even been willing to admit to myself. “I don’t understand how reincarnation works, but there’s a strong chance that I was Colette in a past life.”

The vampire made a grunt of disgust in the back of his throat before saying “You’re a very stupid girl.”

I said nothing. He hadn’t asked a question, but if he had, I was sure that I would have agreed with him.

“This complicates things,” he said, but mostly to himself. “I never would have believed Jessie would have degraded himself in this manner.” Then, turning his attention back to me, he added, “Stupid mortal. This is your fault. You know that, don’t you?”

“Yes,” was my reply.

The vampire looked off into the darkness as if wishing to be away from the sight of me. “We never had this conversation,” he told me. “This is all just a dream. You won’t remember any of this by the time you wake up in the morning.”

I nodded. I didn’t feel like I could do anything but agree with him. But deep down inside, I was terrified. Not for me, necessarily, but for the vampire I loved. “What about Jessie?” I managed to ask, although it was extremely hard to part my jaws and get the words out.



The vampire gave me a surprised, angry look. I could tell he wasn't used to being the one that was questioned, especially by a mortal. "Go back to bed," he snarled. "I will deal with Jessie Vanderlind."

I woke with a start. I was alone in bed. My head felt weird, and for a few seconds, the room was spinning. I had the thought that I might be sick.

I could remember the vampire. I could remember his horrible eyes very clearly but also in a way that was fuzzy. Was it a dream? I wasn't sure. I reached for my dream journal and started writing as madly as I could for fear that the details would slip away like dreams often do. I couldn't see the page as clearly as I wanted, so I reached for my bedside lamp. It was then that I froze in mid-stretch for the switch.

The curtains to my bedroom window were open. I leapt out of bed, dashed over, and yanked them shut. I stood there, trembling in the cold, trying to remember if I'd shut them before going to bed. I usually did. I was pretty sure I'd done it before crawling under the covers. I peeked out through a crack in the drapes. Was he out there?

## Chapter 21

I covered an early shift at the cafe. Joe had called me first thing. Everyone who was scheduled either had the flu or a sprained ankle or had thrown a shoe or whatever excuse they had, legitimate or false, for not showing up to work on Christmas Eve. In a way it was a good thing because my bank account had definitely taken a hit in my effort to drag Jessie into the world of modern communication. He had a computer. It wasn't like he was unwilling to embrace technology. And sure, the castle had zero cell reception, but he did leave the castle from time to time, so I really didn't know what his deal was. Once, when I asked him about not having a cell, he said, "I don't have that many people in my life that I need to call." But that was before he started dating someone as spazzy as me. I needed access. I needed to text once in a while. *Oh God*, I said to myself while on break, *I really am giving him the female equivalent of lingerie.*

As the morning wore on, the dream of the scary, scar-faced vampire faded until it was more of a memory that I'd had a bad dream rather than a memory of the actual dream. The one thing I could distinctly remember was his eyes. When Blossom and I were nine or ten, we'd found an old copy of *The Amityville Horror* and read it by flashlight in a blanket fort we'd built in her room. It scared the poop out of us. I couldn't remember much of the story, but I did remember that there was a demonic pig with glowing red eyes. The thought of a pair of red eyes glowing in the darkness spooked me for months. My crazy dream of the glowing-eyed vampire reawakened this childhood fear.

Blossom called while I was hopping out of the shower that afternoon after my shift. "Hello?" I said, answering the phone with one hand while toweling off my hair with the other.

"Are you co-hostessing this party or not?" she demanded without even bothering to say hello.

"Co-hostessing?" I repeated, slightly confused.

"Yes. Or are you too busy wrapping your legs around Dreamboat?" she said. I could tell she was miffed.

I felt I was on the verge of tumbling into a trap. I had never been called a co-hostess for one of my best friend's parties before, but Blossom must have been feeling a bit ignored. She had temporarily sworn off boys, and I suddenly had a hot and heavy boyfriend. It was a complete role reversal from how things usually went. The fact that she had blown me off numerous times in the past whenever she was first smitten with whatever random dude she'd started dating obviously did not enter into Blossom's memory.

"I'm just drying my hair now," I told her. "I was going to get ready and then head over."

"Do your hair and then get over here," she said. "We can primp once everything's set up." She knew better than to have me fix my hair at her place. Blossom was blessed with wavy blonde hair that obeyed her every whim and command. She and her mother didn't have enough hair products between them to put a dent in my wild mane.

“Okay,” I said automatically, then thought of Jessie. He and his cousin were supposed to pick me up at my house before the party. I opened my mouth to say something but then shut it again. I would just call Jessie’s house like normal girlfriends do and leave a message for him to meet me at the party. It wasn’t that big of a deal.

Actually, it ended up being kind of a big deal. Viggo did not answer the phone and whoever did sounded very put out that I was calling and actually wished to leave a message. I wondered why the family didn’t just buy an answering machine and briefly thought to get Jessie one for Valentine’s Day. But then I remembered that in just a few more days he would have a cell phone, and all this calling and leaving a message with an anonymous staff member who may or may not deliver it would stop.

When I arrived at Blossom’s, Sheila was already there. I wanted to ask my best friend about the need for me to “co-hostess” when she already had help but decided to just bite my tongue. “Is that what you’re wearing?” was the first thing out of Sheila’s mouth when she saw me.

I looked down at my sweater and jeans. I did have a nice outfit to wear over to the Vanderlinds’ but hadn’t thought to dress up for an outdoor party in the middle of winter. “Yes,” I told her. “This is what I’m wearing. Can’t you see it or are you having some eye problems?”

Sheila gave me a flat look. “I just thought with having such a fabulously hot and wealthy boyfriend, you might try to put some effort into your appearance. Guess I was wrong.”

“Merry Christmas!” Blossom said, interrupting our little spat. “Who wants a little sample of my special holiday punch to get the party started?”

“Yes, please,” Sheila said without hesitation.

I knew by “special punch” Blossom meant she’d doctored it with whatever alcohol she could scrounge. I also knew that if I declined, it would elicit some kind of disdainful reaction from Sheila, and I just wasn’t in the mood for more of that so I said, “Sure. Count me in.”

Blossom doled out the punch into punch glasses from an actual punch bowl with fruit in a frozen ice ring and everything. Her mother was a

caterer, after all. The three of us said “cheers” and clinked glasses before all taking large swigs. If I was being honest, the punch was on the verge of being disgusting. It tasted like Seven-Up mixed with cough syrup, complete with a burning sensation on the back end.

“Mmmm. It’s good,” Sheila said, taking another sip. She actually sounded convincing.

I coughed a little as the punch stripped some cells off the back of my throat but managed a “Mm-hmmm” in agreement.

We got back to work and when neither of them was looking, I tossed my glassful down the sink and then continued arranging the veggie platter. “God,” Sheila said a few minutes later when she saw my empty glass. “Drink much?”

I made a mental note that the next time I decided to ditch a drink I would do it in smaller increments. “I was thirsty,” I said lamely. Even if I actually was thirsty, the punch was one of the last things on the planet I would drink.

“Lush,” she said, rolling her eyes before jerking open the refrigerator and rooting around.

We eventually got the party pulled together, which also involved shoveling snow off the back patio plus dragging out heat lamps and folding tables from Mrs. Coster’s very crowded garage. To be honest, I was expecting Sheila to stand around, not doing much but feeling at liberty to make snide comments as she deemed was necessary, but she actually pitched in and did her fair share.

It seemed like a lot of work for a bunch of teenagers who would have been just as happy with a few bowls full of chips and a place to pee. Typical Tiburon High parties were mostly about drinking, a bit of smoking, and lots of talk about hooking up. I seriously had to wonder why it had been so important to me that Jessie attend in the first place. I was becoming convinced he would think less of me after seeing me in a crowd composed of drunk high school football players and giggling girls.

Guests started arriving around seven. Groups of girls first and then groups of boys about a half hour after that. It was early for a high school

party, but it was also a Christmas Eve party, so I guess kids were willing to make an exception.

“So, where’s this boyfriend of yours?” Sheila asked at about a quarter to eight. I could tell from a slight sway in her stance that the punch was already hitting her hard.

“I don’t know,” I told her as I grabbed a half empty bottle that was just about to tumble off the edge of one of the folding tables we’d set up for food. “I’m sure he’ll be here soon.” It wasn’t like Jessie to be late. I wondered if he’d received my message about not picking me up.

“Yeah, right,” she said with a superior smile, and I suddenly remembered why it had been so important to me that Jessie make an appearance. She continued. “I’m sure you’ll get a phone call at any moment and he’ll have come down with a horrible case of ... Holy crap!” Sheila gasped. She was staring past me toward the gate that led around the side of the house to the front yard. “Is there a male model convention in town or something? Who the hell are they?”



## Chapter 22

I turned to see who Sheila was staring at with her mouth practically hanging open. It was my Jessie, looking gorgeous in a cable knit blue-gray sweater, dark jeans, black boots, and his long, dark coat. His black hair was ruffled, of course, and I knew he had just flown over. Next to him stood another ridiculously good-looking boy, but not much like Jessie at all. He was roughly Jessie's height, and they looked around the same age, but the newcomer had blond hair that hung down below his chin. He wore a black leather jacket, dark jeans, and black motorcycle boots. He wasn't even close to clean shaven. The thing that threw the whole handsome biker look off was his shirt. It was a white button down but without a collar. It looked like an old-fashioned shirt from the time when men used tabs to attach starched collars, but he'd just forgotten to put his collar on. It was an odd contrast to the leather. I assumed the new guest was Dorian.

"That's my boyfriend and his cousin," I informed Sheila. It was my turn to wear a superior smile.

"Seriously?" she said, stunned and amazed. She reached over and squeezed my arm in an excited sort of way. "I'm so glad we're friends."

The party, which was just getting warmed up with kids talking loud and music being selected, got quite subdued. Everyone turned to gawk at the newcomers. Jessie and Dorian stood there, confidently observing the crowd. They may have looked like teenagers, but their body language betrayed them as much older—if anyone bothered to notice.

I hurried over to Jessie. "Hi," I said, feeling awkward and shy. I knew my cheeks were turning red. There were already about twenty guests at the party, and I felt every single set of eyes was on me. "Did you get my message?"

Jessie regarded the crowd for a second longer before turning his attention to me. "Yes," he said, bending to place a small kiss on my lips. "I've been missing you," he whispered in my ear, and I felt a wave of warmth wash over me that had nothing to do with the heat lamps. He then opened his stance to include the other vampire. "Miss Aurora Keys, I'd like



to introduce you to my cousin, Mr. Dorian Vanderlind. Dorian, this is Aurora.”

“I’ve heard so much about you, Aurora,” Dorian said, taking my hand and bending to kiss it. I couldn’t help but notice that his eyes were gray, the same as Jessie’s. He was looking at me rather hungrily, and that was never a good thing from a vampire. I wanted to yank my hand away. But Dorian held my hand firmly in place, his lips hovering above my flesh. “I’m sure everything I’ve heard is true.”

“Easy there, cousin,” Jessie said, putting one hand on Dorian’s shoulder and using the other to gently release me from the vampire’s grip. “We’re not at court, you know.” Turning to me, Jessie added, “Dorian has always been a fan of intrigue.”

Dorian smirked. “Especially if it’s of my own creation.”

“It’s nice to meet you,” I said, although that wasn’t really how I felt. I wasn’t sure what to make of Dorian Vanderlind.

“I’m so glad I was included in your invitation,” he said. “I have to admit, I find your situation quite fascinating.”

“You mean someone like Jessie being with someone like me,” I said, unwilling to utter the word “vampire” with so many kids standing nearby.

“Well, yes. There’s that,” Dorian admitted. “But really what perplexes me is the institution of love in general.”

“Institution?” Jessie asked. He’d obviously heard his cousin’s opinion about the subject a few times before.

“I’m being serious,” Dorian insisted. He turned back to me. “You love my cousin, then? You’re willing to admit to it openly and freely?”

I felt my face go bright red. “Yes,” I said in a very faint voice. “I love him.”

Dorian gave me an incredulous look. “Jessie said the same thing about you not half an hour ago. I just can’t understand it. The whole notion is so provincial.”

I wasn’t quite sure how to respond to that statement. I didn’t understand how being in love could be considered provincial. Fortunately, that was

when Blossom and Sheila came over. I could tell they were nervous. They kept giving excited little shoves to prod one another forward. “Hi,” Blossom said to Jessie. “I hope you remember me. It’s nice to see you again.”

“Of course, I remember you, Blossom,” Jessie said with a smile. “Thank you for including us in your festivities.”

“Hi, I’m Sheila,” my favorite frenemy said, sounding like an over-caffeinated cheerleader. She stuck out her hand. “I’m surprised we haven’t met before. But I’m sure Aurora’s told you all about me.”

“It’s nice to meet you, Sheila,” Jessie said, shaking her hand but not lingering over it. “I’d like to introduce you both to my cousin Dorian.” He turned to his cousin. “Dorian, may I introduce you to Blossom and Sheila.”

Dorian looked at the girls as if they were a pair of annoying small dogs yipping at his feet rather than two over-eager young women. A glare from Jessie caused him to quickly adjust his attitude. “How do you do?” he asked.

Both of my friends were quick to let him know that they were just fine. They practically tripped over each other in their eagerness to provide the new guests with glasses of punch and tried to tempt them with numerous snacks, all of which the boys declined.

After the initial fluttering, both girls calmed down a bit. Additional guests arrived, and Blossom reluctantly broke away to greet them. She took her hostessing duties seriously, even when there were super hot guys to potentially distract her.

“So, what school do you go to?” Sheila asked Dorian, in an attempt to make conversation.

“I don’t attend high school,” he informed her.

“Really? Are you like homeschooled or what?” she wanted to know.

“I’ve completed my education,” he said, without further detail.

Sheila looked a little confused, unsure if the boy was snubbing her or just being formal. “I guess you’re older than you look.”

Jessie cleared his throat in an attempt to conceal a small chuckle.

I could see Sheila gathering her resolve to steer the conversation in a more flirty direction when something just past where Dorian was standing caught her attention. “What’s she doing here?” Sheila demanded in a very annoyed voice.

I turned to look at who had caused her ire, and it was Haley Scott entering the party with a couple of friends. I had no idea why the mere presence of Haley had Sheila in such a twist. It didn’t appear to be very rational. “Excuse me,” Sheila said, storming off in the direction of the new guests.

Dorian looked after her with amusement. “I haven’t interacted with mortals in so long,” he said, not bothering to lower his voice. “Is this how young women usually behave? It’s really quite fascinating.”

“You haven’t been interacting with mortals?” Fred asked, entering the conversation unannounced. I hadn’t even realized he’d arrived at the party. “What does that mean? Have you been living in your mom’s basement playing World of Warcraft with demigods or something?”

“Humans,” Jessie said quickly. “He meant to say he hasn’t been hanging out with humans.”

Fred wasn’t letting it go. “What have you been doing? Studying apes in the jungle?”

“Yes,” said Dorian, completely unfazed. “I just got back from Rwanda. How did you know?”

“You’re kidding,” Fred said in a flat tone that made it clear he knew Dorian was kidding. “Is that where you got that shirt?”

Dorian narrowed his eyes. I saw a small glimmer in them that definitely held some malice.

“Fred,” I said, interrupting whatever male hormone–fueled competition was building between them before it got out of control. “Have you met Jessie and Dorian Vanderlind?” I asked, although I knew he hadn’t. “Dorian is visiting for the holidays,” I told him. “They’re cousins.”

“So you’re Aurora’s boyfriend,” Fred said, looking Jessie over. “I’ve heard a lot about you.” That was a lie, but I couldn’t exactly tell Jessie that in front of Fred.

“How do you do?” Jessie said. “Aurora’s told me about you, as well.” I had mentioned Fred’s name once to Jessie. He knew I’d started dating someone when he had broken up with me for my own safety. He’d warned me not to give him any more details about my ex-boyfriend, but apparently the few that he knew, he’d committed to memory. There was some awkward silence as the boys all sized each other up.

“Fred,” Blossom said, appearing out of nowhere and linking her arm in his. She must have sensed something was brewing. “I’m having trouble with one of the heat lamps. Would you please help me?” She led him off before he could give an answer either way.

After that, things relaxed a little. I even had a half cup of punch cut with a lot of ginger ale to take the edge off. Jessie and Dorian stood around observing everybody and appearing haughty. I had no idea what stick they had shoved up their butts, but it was like having two Mr. Darcys at a country dance. People were trying to be friendly, and the vampires were not.

To be more accurate, it was mostly the girls who were trying to be friendly. Especially to Dorian. He was, after all, to all appearances, unaffiliated. I had more than one acquaintance pull me aside and say something like, “Oh. My. God. You are sooo lucky. How did you ever start dating a Vanderlind? And how can I get one?” I wondered how they would react if they knew either of the handsome boys could rip their throats out with their bare teeth. It was best not to find out.

The guests kept getting louder and louder. It was not even nine o’clock, pretty early in the evening for the party to get rowdy, but I guess Blossom’s killer punch was accelerating the process. People were starting to get stupid. A couple of jocks were tossing around cans of soda like they were footballs. Every time one of the boys missed a pass, the can would hit the ground, cracking in small places and spraying fizzy streams of liquid everywhere. They thought it was hilarious. I wondered if designated drivers had been selected or if people were going to have to figure out inventive ways to get home. Mervin wasn’t around for late-night emergency shuttling.

Dorian eventually wandered away from Jessie and me. He started talking to a few of the girls. Of everyone vying for his attention, Sheila was working the hardest. When she wasn’t trying to sit in his lap or laughing a

bit hysterically at his slightest joke, she was racing over to me to ask “What do you know about Jessie’s cousin? Is he dating anyone? Is Dorian going to be staying in Tiburon for a while?” and things like that.

At first, I thought there was little harm in it. Dorian definitely wasn’t interested. He tried to talk a few times to Haley, of all people, but he really gave the appearance of a person sitting in a theater trying to endure a bad play. Then Sheila started trying to dance around in front of Dorian in a provocative manner, and I began to get concerned. Her dancing was awkward at best, and I couldn’t help but feel embarrassed for her.

“What’s he doing?” Jessie said, squinting over at his cousin with a disapproving look on his face. He turned to me. “This isn’t going well. We should leave soon.”

I took a closer look at Dorian. He was staring intently at Sheila, but there was also a look of disdain in his eyes. An alarm bell went off in my head. Before I had time to give it a second thought, I was in front of him. “What do you think you’re doing?” I said in a low hiss.

“What?” he said, looking up and trying to appear innocent.

“You’re using your influence on Sheila,” I said, not caring to check my tone, even though I was accusing a vampire of misdoings.

Dorian released a cruel chuckle. “I am doing no such thing,” he informed me. “Manipulating the simpleminded holds no challenge for me.” He waved a vague hand in Sheila’s direction. “She’s doing this of her own accord.”

“Look out,” Fred called, thundering through the cluster of girls around Dorian as he attempted to catch a soda can that somebody had lobbed in our direction. The can bounced out of his hands and slammed down on the patio, spraying soda all over me and the vampire.

“You idiot!” Dorian said, jumping to his feet.

Fred looked at the dripping vampire, doing little to conceal his amusement. “Sorry, dude,” he said before turning to lope off.

But even an athlete like Fred wasn’t quick enough to elude the lightning fast reflexes of a vampire. Dorian grabbed him by the arm and yanked him back to stand in front of him. “Sorry, dude?” he said, his eyes blazing with

anger. “That’s what passes for good manners these days? You splash this young lady and myself with soda, and the only thing you think to do is say ‘Sorry, dude.’ Do I understand you correctly?”

I had to admit that Fred was acting weird. He normally wasn’t such a jerk, but I think it probably had a lot to do with Jessie being at the party. “Yeah,” he said. “You understand me, Lord Fauntleroy. It’s just a party foul. What do you expect me to do?”

“I expect you to apologize sincerely and then ask the young lady if you can get her a towel or something to assist her,” Dorian said with a snarl.

“I’m fine,” I insisted. Actually, the soda had soaked me pretty good, but it wasn’t worth having Fred’s throat ripped out. “I brought a change of clothes with me anyway.”

They both ignored me. Dorian wouldn’t release Fred’s arm. He glared intently into Fred’s eyes. “I’m sorry,” Fred said after a few moments. “I was being inconsiderate.” I couldn’t tell if he was under Dorian’s influence or if he just saw something in the vampire’s eyes that let him know he was dealing with a dangerous creature.

Dorian released him. “Thank you,” he said. “I accept your apology.”

Fred walked away rather quickly, even though I was sure his ego was smarting.

“I think we need to get going,” Jessie said, appearing at my elbow. “My mother is expecting us.”

“I think I’ll stay here awhile longer, if you don’t mind,” Dorian said, his eyes not leaving the departing Fred for a few seconds. Eventually, he turned to look at me. “Don’t worry. I’ll keep an eye on your little friends.”

## Chapter 23

“Do you think we should have done that?” I asked as Jessie and I walked to my car. We’d quickly said our goodbyes, and I’d changed into my nicer outfit before heading out the door.

“What?” he wanted to know.

“Left Dorian with all those kids.” Jessie’s cousin was definitely not blending in well with the other guests at the party.

“They’re safer with Dorian there than they would be without him.” Jessie unlocked the passenger side door for me and held it open.

“Are you sure about that?” I asked as I climbed in. “He didn’t look like he wanted to help keep anybody safe.” I restrained myself from adding *Especially Fred*.

“Of course he does,” Jessie said, closing my door and heading around to the driver’s side. “Why do you think I invited him to visit?” he asked as he climbed in next to me. “He’s at least a relative I know I can trust.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Dorian doesn’t visit every Christmas,” Jessie explained. “I asked him to come because something is very wrong in Tiburon, and I thought the town might need a little extra protection.”

“You invited a vampire to Tiburon to help protect the town against vampires?” I asked, slightly incredulous. “Isn’t that a bit like the NRA?”

It was Jessie's turn to be confused. "The National Rifle Association?" He started the car, the engine protesting against the cold.

"You know, whenever there's a shooting, the NRA announces the best way to stop the shootings is to have more guns." When Jessie still looked confused, I explained. "Tiburon has a vampire problem and you think the best way to solve it is to bring in more vampires."

"You may be right," Jessie said with a rueful laugh as he pulled the bug out onto the street. "But to be honest with you, I really couldn't think of what else to do."

We drove along for a few minutes in silence. Finally, I said, "I'm sorry if you didn't have a very good time at the party."

"What are you talking about?" he asked, taking his eyes off the road for a moment to glance over at me, eyebrows slightly knitted.

"I know all my friends must look very immature to you," I told him. "I understand why you weren't talking to any of them. I just feel bad that I forced you to go and that you had a lousy time."

"Aurora, being around young people socializing is actually pretty refreshing for me," Jessie said. "I wasn't socializing because I was too busy scanning the skies in case of attack."

I stared at him. "You think that could happen?" I asked. "A vampire could just dive out of the sky and snatch some kid out of the center of a party?" I pressed the button on my side of the car to double check that the door was locked.

"I don't know if it could happen," Jessie told me. "But it's beginning to feel like a possibility." He pulled up to a red light then turned to look at me. "When kids started disappearing without a trace, it made me nervous, so I reached out to Dorian and asked him to visit. I know he comes off as arrogant sometimes, but I trust him."

"That's good," I said in a small voice, thinking of the way his cousin was staring daggers at Fred.

"I was beginning to think I was overreacting until that taxi driver disappeared, and then you told me about the man you saw in the cemetery."



Then I knew I'd made the right decision." The light turned green, and he started driving again.

"Who was that man?"

Jessie frowned, shaking his head slightly. "I'm not sure, but he sounds like trouble."

I had the definite feeling Jessie was keeping something from me. I looked down at my hands and realized they were shaking. "We have to go back," I said. "My friends ... We can't leave them unprotected."

"Aurora, there are thousands of people that are unprotected in Tiburon right now. We can't follow everyone all the time," he told me, reaching out and squeezing my trembling hands. "The person at that party I was most worried about protecting was you. Dorian can handle the rest."

"Will you stay with me tonight?" I asked, gathering my coat tighter around my neck and peering furtively out the window at the black sky.

"I would like to, of course, but there's really no need. As long as you don't invite anyone else into your house, you should be quite safe," he assured me.

A memory nagged at my brain. "This is going to sound strange," I began, "and I might just be remembering a dream, but I think that man with the scar came to my window last night."

Jessie gave me an alarmed look and then quickly pulled the car over to the side of the road. Putting it in park, he said, "What are you talking about? Tell me everything."

I really struggled to recount the events that may or may not have occurred the previous night. In fact, if I hadn't immediately written everything down in my dream journal, I was sure I wouldn't have remembered any of it. As it was, things were foggy, and I stumbled around in my narrative.

When I was finished, Jessie closed his eyes for several seconds and said nothing. "So what do you think?" I finally asked to break the silence. "Did it really happen? Was it just a dream? I can't even tell."

Jessie opened his beautiful gray eyes and looked deep into mine. “I love you,” he said. “I love you, and I will protect you, no matter what.”

“What is it, Jessie?” I asked, a slight quaver in my voice. I then asked a question with a very obvious answer. “That scary dude is a vampire, and he was on my porch roof?”

Jessie nodded.

“So then why is it all hazy in my brain? Why did I think it was a dream?” I wanted to know.

“I think he used his influence over you to make you forget,” he told me. “You’re not all that prone to vampire influence, so that must be why you can remember so much of it.”

“Great,” I said, rubbing at my eyes to keep back the tears. I knew I was ruining my makeup, but crying would only make it worse.

Jessie reached out and took my face in his hands. “I will keep you safe, Aurora,” he said, leaning forward and kissing each of my eyelids with a touch as light as a butterfly. “I will keep you safe.”

I believed him. Actually, I had no choice. I couldn’t exactly protect myself from an angry vampire. “Are you taking me home?” I asked as Jessie pulled out on to the road again.

“No,” he told me. “We’re still going to the castle. My mother has gone to a lot of trouble to make this Christmas Eve special, and I wouldn’t want to disappoint her.”

“Do you think I’ll be safe there?” I asked rather hesitantly.

Jessie let out a low laugh. “As bizarre as it may sound, you’ll probably be safer in a house full of vampires than anywhere else right now.”

Even with that reassurance, I was still nervous. In part because my fears had been confirmed—last night’s visitor was very real, not just a terrifying nightmare. But also because it’s always nerve wracking to pay a visit to your boyfriend’s vampire mother. Especially when she lives in a large stone castle and has an older son that once suggested handing me over to a swarm of vampires as the best way to get rid of me.

We pulled up to the castle gate. A guard stepped out of a small booth and let us in, giving no reaction if he found it surprising that Jessie was driving an ancient gold VW bug. All of the Vanderlind cars were in mint condition, and my bug had the habit of sputtering and backfiring.

“You look beautiful,” Jessie said as he took my hand to help me from the car. He had insisted upon getting my door even though Viggo had been standing by to do it.

“Good evening, Miss Aurora,” the giant said as we walked toward the house with him bringing up the rear. “I hope you have a vonderful holiday.”

“Thank you, Viggo,” I told him. “Merry Christmas to you, too.”

“Gloria asked that I extend to you her good vishes.”

“Oh, I hope I get to see her tonight,” I told him. “I don’t know if she’s busy, but if she has the chance, will you ask her to stop by and say hello?”

“I vill tell her you asked after her,” the giant said. “But she is very busy with the preparing of the feast, so I do not know if she can find the time.”

I didn’t know if that meant it wasn’t proper for her to come out from behind the scenes to say hello or if she was seriously that busy. “That’s okay,” I assured him. “Please tell her I said Merry Christmas.”

Turning to Jessie, I widened my eyes. “Feast?” I asked.

“Mother thought you might like to eat a little something,” he told me, and I could tell he was a bit embarrassed. “She hasn’t had an opportunity to have a real Christmas celebration in almost a century, so please just indulge her.”

“Okay,” I said, but with some reservations. The last time I was invited to dine with friendly vampires, they begged me to sample so many dishes that I thought I might burst. “It isn’t going to be like Madame Csorbo’s dinner. Is it?” I wanted to know.

Jessie looked even more embarrassed. “It might be a little bit like that.”

“Oh, great,” I muttered to myself. If I’d known, I wouldn’t have spent the last day and a half chowing on holiday cookies.

As soon as we entered the castle, a woman's voice called out, "Colette. How wonderful to see you again." Jessie's mother swooped down on me all glittering diamonds and silk. She was a stunning woman with Jessie's wavy black hair and gray eyes. We exchanged a rather awkward hug and then she stepped back, holding both of my hands. "Don't you look charming," she said. I knew it was a white lie meant to spare my feelings. I was in a wool skirt, thick tights, and a sweater. Mrs. Vanderlind was in a ruby-red silk gown and dripping with diamonds. She seemed a little overdressed for a family Christmas Eve dinner, but she also looked like a movie star from the golden age of film. Jessie told me she was turned by her father when she was twenty-four, which explained why she looked more like his older sister than his mom.

Mrs. Vanderlind turned and called over her shoulder, "Daniel. Colette is here." I fought back the urge to correct her about my name. Jessie and I'd had to pretend I was Colette when we went to plead our case in Budapest. Mrs. Vanderlind obviously felt the need to keep up the ruse.

Another vampire appeared in front of me, but without the same enthusiasm as Mrs. Vanderlind. This vampire was rather sullen. "Hello, Aurora," Jessie's brother, Daniel, said, the disdain in his voice almost palpable. It was obvious that Daniel was Jessie's brother; they had the same build, the same dark hair, the same gray eyes, but Daniel didn't have the warmth that added to Jessie's good looks. Daniel was handsome, but with more of a sinister look. There was something slightly reptilian about him.

"Happy Christmas," Daniel added, but any happiness I may incur was not his intent. Given a choice between listening to Daniel speak to me or walking through the desert and suddenly hearing a snake's rattle, there was a good chance I would have gone with the snake.

"Come in. Come in," Mrs. Vanderlind insisted as Viggo relieved me of my coat. "I'm so glad you were able to join us," she said, taking me by the hand and leading me into the great hall.

The furniture in the vast room had been pushed against the walls. In the center of the room was an enormous Christmas tree dripping with decorations from the highest peak to the lowest branch. I thought it would take a storage area larger than my mom's house to warehouse all the ornament boxes in the off season. But I suppose when you live in a giant

castle, you have spare room for frivolous items. “It’s beautiful,” I said, marveling at the tree. It really was like something out of an old-fashioned Christmas story when the little poor boy finally discovers that he is a member of a very rich family.

“I’ve had so much fun decorating, not to mention planning the meal,” Jessie’s mom enthused. “I really can’t remember the last time I’ve enjoyed the holiday season so much.” She was so excited, she was practically glowing.

Jessie couldn’t help but laugh. “Oh, give her your present, already, why don’t you?” he said.

I gulped. It had never occurred to me to purchase presents for Jessie’s family. “I’m sorry,” I told her. “I didn’t know we were doing a gift exchange.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Mrs. Vanderlind said. “I’ve just been trying out a new hobby and ended up making you a gift.”

Her comment left me scratching my head. I’d never really thought of vampires as having hobbies. “That’s nice,” was all I could think to say.

Mrs. Vanderlind scampered over to the tree like an excited child proud to show off her handiwork. She pulled out a medium-sized box wrapped in shiny paper and festooned with multicolored ribbons. “I know you probably think I’m being silly,” she said, “but please open it now. I can’t wait to see you in it.”

I indulged her and started peeling back the paper, but apparently I wasn’t going fast enough because she started tearing at it herself. “Here, let me just help you with that,” she said, by way of an excuse.

Once the box was free of paper, she pulled off the lid and left me to page through a layer of lavender tissue paper to reveal an emerald green angora sweater. “It’s lovely,” I said, gently touching the soft yarn.

“I had to guess on your size, so I hope I was correct,” Mrs. Vanderlind said snatching the sweater out of the box and holding it up to me. “You wouldn’t mind trying it on. Would you?”

“Oh, for crying out loud, Mother,” Daniel said with an irritated sigh. “It’s just a sweater.”

“Of course, I don’t mind trying it on,” I told her, doing my best to ignore Daniel.

I quickly peeled out of my own sweater and slipped the angora over my shoulders. It buttoned up the front with little pearl buttons and had a round collar. It gave me some room in the bust and shoulders but nipped in at the waist. I knew instantly that it flattered my rather hourglass figure where most sweaters tended to turn me into a box with legs. “You made this?” I couldn’t help but exclaim.

Jessie’s mom nodded, a pleased smile on her lips as she took in her handiwork. “I started knitting a few months ago.”

“How did you manage to learn to make something like this in just a few months?” I had to ask.

She shrugged. “When you live for an eternity, you find you have a lot of time on your hands. I’ve found it’s best to stay busy.”

“It’s lovely,” I told her with all sincerity. “Thank you very much.”

“You’re welcome, my dear,” she said, and I could tell she was enjoying the glow of giving a well-appreciated gift.

“What do they call these things?” Daniel asked in a droll voice. “A Hallmark moment. When the vampiress teaches her future daughter-in-law how to knit.” He rolled his eyes. “I’m so glad my presence was required here so I could be a witness.”

Jessie glared at his brother. “I see that you’re in your traditional festive spirit,” he said. “It’s nice to know that some things never change.”

Mrs. Vanderlind shot both her sons an annoyed look. “Play nice, you two,” she scolded. “Jessie, where is your cousin? I thought you went out together.”

“We did, but he got caught up,” he told her. I thought I saw Jessie briefly glance in my direction, and I wondered if it was a secret that the two of them had gone to a mortal party. I thought it was best not to say anything. I didn’t want to be the one who let the cat out of the bag.

A servant dressed in the purple livery of the Vanderlind family appeared at my elbow. “Salmon mousse on wheat with chives?” he offered, extending

a tray toward me with dozens of dollops of whipped salmon on mini-toast.

Maybe it was the fact that I'd grown up in the middle of Ohio, but I hated fish. I mean, I couldn't even stand the smell of it. But Jessie's mother gave me such a hopeful look that I had to accept one, along with a small linen napkin. I popped the morsel into my mouth, feeling the gross fishiness of it sliding over my tongue. I made a little noise of approval and managed to say, "It's delicious."

"Do you really like it?" she asked, beaming. "It's from a recipe I found on the Internet." She emphasized the word "Internet" like it was a novel thing for her to do.

"It's really good," I assured her, hoping I wouldn't have to have another one. I wondered if there was any way I could ask for something to drink without appearing rude. Vampires sometimes forgot things about being mortal, like that mortals get cold or become thirsty.

"This is ridiculous," Daniel said.

"Daniel," his mother snapped. "I don't demand hospitable manners from you every day, but the once in a decade when I do ask for them, I expect you to comply."

"Fine," he grumbled. He was obviously one of those guys who think that just because they're not having a good time, they're entitled to make everyone else miserable. "Although," he added, "I think you should know that standing around watching you feed Jessie's pet isn't all that enjoyable."

"Why don't we have a little holiday music," Jessie suggested, crossing the room to what looked like a dresser. "That's probably something we all can enjoy." He flipped open the top of the dresser to reveal a record player.

"That's a lovely idea," his mother told him, giving her youngest son an appreciative smile.

"You always were such a little suck-up," Daniel said, directing the comment at his brother. "No matter how often you screw up or humiliate the family, you're always forgiven because you're so good at kissing ass."

Jessie laughed. "Is that right, Daniel? Is that why you think people prefer me over you?"

“I know it is,” he replied. The look in his eyes was so hateful, I had the feeling Daniel wouldn’t mind staking his brother if he could. “And I know a lot more than that.” A cruel smile spread across his lips. “Your days as the family golden boy are about to end.”

Jessie glared defiantly back at Daniel, but I could tell he was a little concerned. “What’s that supposed to mean?” he asked. Daniel was way too smug.

Then from somewhere near the kitchen there was a loud crash. An angry male voice bellowed, “Get out of my way, you lumbering brute.”

“You are not welcome in this house,” we could hear Viggo telling someone. “You have not been invited, and you are not welcome.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” the other man told him. There was a sharp yelp of pain from Viggo, and I knew something bad had happened. The man went on to say “This is my house.”

Jessie and his mother whipped their heads around, staring open mouthed in the direction of the commotion. “Jessie, what is it?” I asked, my voice coming out as a frightened squeak. Daniel was wearing a delighted smile, so I knew it must be something very bad.

The scar-faced man strode into the room, his eyes like two burning embers. “I’m home, my children,” he announced. Then, looking significantly in my direction, he added, “What’s good to eat?”

Before I had a chance to even draw another breath, Jessie had scooped me up in his arms, spirited me out the door, and launched us into the night.



## **Chapter 24**

“Jessie,” I said, a bitter winter wind blasting me in the face as we flew. He had me clutched in his arms and was squeezing me so tight it was painful, but I was too frightened to think to ask him to stop. “Who was that man?”

“He’s my grandfather,” Jessie said. He was flying at breakneck speed, trying to put distance between us and the castle.

“Your what?” I asked, unsure if I’d heard him correctly.

“My grandfather,” he repeated.

What he said made no sense, but we were getting pretty close to my house, so I decided not to pester him any further until we had our feet on the ground.

Jessie flew me right onto our front porch even though the porch light was on. If any neighbors had happened to be looking out the window, they would have had quite a surprise. “What about my car?” I asked him. “My bag? It has all my stuff. What about my winter coat?”

“Go inside,” he said, ignoring all my questions. “Lock the door. Make sure everything is locked.”

“Jessie,” I said, grabbing his coat so he couldn’t immediately fly off into the night. “How is that your grandfather? I thought you said he was dead.”

“I thought he was dead,” he told me. “It doesn’t make sense that he would still be alive.” He closed his eyes for a second, shaking his head slightly as if trying to erase a memory. “I should have known better. When you described the man that was watching us at the graveyard, I should have known. It sounded like him, but I convinced myself that it couldn’t be true.”

“But ...” I also shook my head, almost mirroring him, unable to take it in.

“Aurora, I don’t know what’s going on,” he told me, removing my hands from his coat in a manner that was rougher than he usually treated me. “But I’ve left my mother alone with him so that I could make sure you were safe. I have to go back immediately. Now, get inside!”

He sounded so angry and so desperate, that I didn't say another word. I just fumbled with the keys and finally managed to wrench open the door. As I was about to step inside, Jessie suddenly grabbed my face with both hands and kissed me rather forcefully.

"I don't know what's going to happen," he said in a ragged whisper. "Just know that I love you. I'll try to send you word when I can." With that, he vanished into the night. I stood staring at the darkness for a few seconds, tears cascading down my cheeks. Then I remembered myself, hurried inside, and bolted the door.

After that, I wasn't sure what to do. The house felt very still. I was expecting to see my mother, for some reason, sitting at the kitchen table or tucked under a throw on the couch in the living room, but the only trace I could find of her was a plate on the kitchen table. It held a sugar cookie and a carrot. Beside the plate was a note:

*"Dear Santa,*

*We have been very good this year. The carrot is for you and the cookie for your reindeer.*

*Love,*

*Aurora and Helen"*

"That's right," I said to myself. The idea was disorienting, but it didn't stop it from being a fact. "Tomorrow's Christmas." Then I looked at the clock on the stove and corrected myself. "Today is Christmas." It was ten minutes after midnight.

I sat on my bed for a long time thinking about what had happened. I wondered if Viggo was all right. He didn't sound all right. He sounded at

the very least like something was broken. And how was Jessie's grandfather still alive? I remembered the story Jessie had told me. His grandfather had been dumped into the middle of the Atlantic Ocean by horrified passengers aboard an ocean liner on its way to America. I guess that didn't guarantee death, especially for a vampire, but it made it pretty damn likely.

I am not proud of myself, but I ended up taking two sleeping pills. I wasn't an idiot; I knew it was dangerous to overmedicate, especially with something like sleeping pills, but I was exhausted and freaked out and knew for a fact that one sleeping pill wasn't going to do a damn thing to help me close my eyes.

The next thing I knew, my mother was gently shaking me and saying, "Sweetie, wake up."

"Whah ...?" I said, having trouble opening my eyes. They were so crusted over. "What's going on?"

"I'm bored and you've been asleep forever," Mom told me. "Wake up. It's Christmas."

I sat up in bed and gave her a hug. "Merry Christmas."

Mom and I tried to keep our Christmases pretty simple. We each only got the other one gift. I gave Mom a vest, which she said she loved, and she gave me a pair of super cute boots, which I really did love. Then Mom always got some kind of craft for us to do or game for us to play so we'd actually have a fun activity to occupy us for most of the day. She always wrapped it up like it was a gift for me, but it was really a gift for us. This year it was a knitting machine and a bunch of fun yarn. "I thought we could try making sweaters," she said, which made me think of the sweater Mrs. Vanderlind had given me, which was draped over my desk chair. I was still wearing it when Grandpa Vanderlind had burst in.

"Don't you like it?" Mom asked, seeing the expression on my face.

"No, I really like it," I told her. "I just didn't know there was a machine that could do knitting, and I was thinking how long it would take to knit a sweater by hand."

"Longer than I'm willing to spend," Mom joked. "Let's get breakfast, and then we can try setting it up."

Mom put on some festive music while we whipped up pancakes, eggs, and bacon. We'd pick up Grandma Gibson in the early afternoon for another meal around three, so we didn't load up too much—like we would have if we were having our dinner at a regular time.

I tried to keep my brain from worrying about Jessie and his family, but it was impossible. I just couldn't stop. Any time I had a free second, my brain would immediately go back to worry. The outcome was that I did most of the cooking and all of the dishes.

"Is everything all right?" Mom asked as she watched me scrubbing at an imaginary stain on the counter.

"Fine," I told her. "Everything's fine."

"Do you want to talk about it?" she asked.

I thought for a second about how I would talk to my mother about my boyfriend being a vampire and his psycho grandfather showing up to ruin Mrs. Vanderlind's Christmas Eve party. "No," I told her. "I really don't."

"Well, I'm sorry to hear that because I do," was her reply. "And I don't blame you for being upset with me."

I looked up from scrubbing the counter. "Huh?"

"Sit down," she said, pulling out a kitchen chair for me. "I've owed you an explanation for a long time."

"Oh ... kay ..." I said hesitantly. I really had no idea what she was talking about.

"Danny and I met through work," she began, a bright spot of pink appearing on each of her cheeks.

"Danny?" I said, unable to hide my complete surprise. I really hadn't expected the conversation was going to be about a guy. "You work together?"

"We don't exactly work together, but we met at a conference last year, and then he had some business within my department."

"Last year?" I said. I had no idea why I kept repeating her.

“At first, it was just casual. He has kids, and I have you, so I didn’t want to say anything because I didn’t want to make it complicated,” Mom told me. “But then we started spending more and more time together. I knew you were probably wondering what was going on, but in a weird sort of way, I didn’t want to jinx it.”

I gave her a blank stare. I felt guilty because I hadn’t noticed her time had been occupied. I’d been too caught up in my own nonsense.

“We grew very close over Thanksgiving,” she admitted. “I was upset about your father, and Danny was really supportive.”

“Okay.” I nodded a few times. I’d driven them closer by letting my mom think I’d spent Thanksgiving with my dad when I’d really gone to Budapest to face down a family of vampires. “That’s nice,” I managed to say. “But why are you telling me all this now?”

“Well ...” she stalled, both of her cheeks red as a rose. “We’re talking about getting engaged.”

My mouth fell open. “What ...?” I stammered.

“I know it’s a lot to take in all at once, and we haven’t really figured out the logistics of combining our two families, but we want to at least get engaged and then work toward a solution,” she blurted in one long breath.

Too many thoughts started crowding my brain. Many of them were based on the fact that she was my mom and I didn’t want to share her. But I knew that was selfish. I was going to turn eighteen and be heading off to college soon. I was going to be venturing into the life of an adult. I couldn’t deny my mom the chance at happiness with a man she loved just because I was feeling a little jealous.

“Mom, that’s wonderful,” I said, rising from my chair and throwing my arms around her. “That’s so great. I’m so happy for you. I can’t wait to meet him.”

“Really?” Mom exclaimed, returning my hug. “I thought you might be upset because of the other morning.”

“Other morning?” I asked, pulling back to get a look at her face. “What are you talking about?”

Mom covered her eyes with her hand. “This is so embarrassing because I’m always so strict about you not having boys in your room.”

“Mom!” I exclaimed, half laughing but also a little shocked. “Have you been setting a bad example?”

“Yes,” Mom admitted from behind her hand. “And I was pretty sure you saw Danny leaving the house the other morning.”

I folded my arms and gave her a stern look. “You are so grounded.”

As the day closed in on noon, we finally got out of our pajamas and got ready to pick up Grandma Gibson. “How is Grams doing lately, anyway?” I asked, and we bundled into our coats. I was ashamed to admit it, but I hadn’t given her much thought since the funeral. *Oh God*, I thought. *I’m one of those girls who get a boyfriend and then blow off everyone else in their lives.* Of course, my boyfriend was a vampire, and I had to deal with all the entanglements of dating the undead, but that really was no excuse.

Mom shrugged. “I hate to admit it, but I haven’t really thought about her much since the funeral.” She hung her head. “I’m a crappy granddaughter.”

“Mom, you’re an awesome granddaughter,” I said. “I don’t know anyone who takes care of their grandparent as much as you,” I assured her. “You’ve just been excited about your own life. That’s a forgivable offense.”

“Thanks, sweetie.” She kissed me on the head. “You’re an awesome great granddaughter.”

I barely remembered to grab the black umbrella as we headed to the garage. At a certain point, I knew the retirement community staff was going to get tired of me being an irresponsible teenager.

“Where’s your car?” Mom asked as we stepped into the garage. She’d already given me a suspicious look as I put on my winter parka instead of my dressier wool coat.

“I left it at Jessie’s, and he gave me a ride home,” I said. “It didn’t start and they have a mechanic on staff at the castle, so Jessie said he’d have the

guy look at it.” I had no idea if they had a mechanic on staff at the castle, but given the size of the building, it felt like a possibility.

“That was nice of him,” Mom said as we both climbed into her car. “I’m glad you’re dating a boy who looks out for you.”

It felt so surreal sitting in the car while Mom drove us to pick up Grandma Gibson when so much else was going on. I was worried about Jessie and desperately wanted to know what was happening. What the hell did his grandfather want and where had he been for the last several decades? It made me want to scream in frustration.

On the other hand, I was also a little blindsided by the news that my mother was on the verge of getting engaged. To a man I hadn’t even met. And he had kids. A girl and a boy, my mom informed me as we drove, both of whom were in high school.

We had Christmas music playing, and my mom was chatting along about her future plans. I tried to fake being happy and excited, but I wasn’t sure I was doing a very good job. If my mom noticed, she didn’t comment on it, which was good. I was having difficulty keeping it together. Knowing her, she was probably giving me space to process the engagement bomb she’d just dropped on me.

All of the information I was processing was compounded by the fact that we were about to pick up Grandma Gibson. Neither of us had the slightest read on what kind of state she would be in seeing that we’d both been too self-absorbed to check up on her. I was really hoping for some semblance of a normal great grandmother. I didn’t think I could handle any other challenges piled on my plate.



## Chapter 25

“Hello, my darling girls!” Grandma Gibson called, holding her arms out to both of us as we entered her room.

“Merry Christmas, Grams,” Mom said. We both started smiling. Grandma was seated on her bed in a nice skirt, blouse, and sweater. Mom bent to give her a hug. “Who gave you the pretty corsage?” she asked, noticing the flowers pinned to her grandmother’s chest.

“I have a new beau,” Grandma Gibson said, her face flushed a little with the admission.

“You do?” I exclaimed as I bent to hug her. “Who?” I couldn’t help but ask. “Where did you meet him?”

“Your young friend introduced me to him,” she explained. “He lives just down the hall. He’s been courting me,” she said with a bit of a girlish giggle.

“Fred’s great grandfather?” I couldn’t help but gasp.

Mom gave her grandmother a stern look. “Should we meet this gentleman? What are his intentions?”

Grandma Gibson clucked her tongue in mock concern. “I’m afraid they’re not very honorable.”

I couldn’t believe my great grandmother had a boyfriend. And my mother. And me, for that matter. It felt like a very notable moment in history. Or at least the history of my family.

We were eager to meet Mr. Lighton officially, but his family had already picked him up for the day. “Maybe when you drop me off,” Grandma Gibson said as we helped her out to the car.

On the way home, Mom revealed the news about her pending engagement, and Grams was thrilled. The two women I loved the most in the world were so happy that it made me happy, despite my worries and fears. All I had to do was fix Blossom up with Fred, and every woman in my life would be set.

I caught myself putting my hand to my cheek as I thought things over. Would I be happy if Blossom was with Fred? I took some convincing, but eventually I came to the conclusion that I would. I cared about Fred. More than I realized most of the time because I was always thinking of Jessie. But he had proven himself to be the quality kind of boy that most girls should dream about having. I couldn’t be selfish and want him to stay single after I’d given my heart to somebody else. I decided my New Year’s resolution was to do everything in my power to try to get Blossom and Fred together. That sounded like something worth doing.

Grandma Gibson got a good laugh out of the tarot cards I got her. She knew I was teasing, but I did not doubt she had every intention of giving them a try. She gave me a small white box that wasn’t wrapped but had a red bow. “I was saving this for your eighteenth birthday,” she told me, “but I figure it’s just as well if you have it now.”

I pulled off the lid to find a small silver pendant on a silver chain. Set in a sterling silver frame was an oval piece of etched glass, or maybe it was crystal, I couldn’t tell, but there were rays radiating out from the middle of the crystal so it looked like sunbeams spreading outward. The silver around the outside of the crystal was ornate filigree work, and in the very center of the crystal was a small, gleaming white stone, which I guessed was a diamond chip.

“It was Lettie’s,” Grams told me. “The nicest piece of jewelry she had. She always wore it, so I naturally assumed she was wearing it the night she disappeared, but then I found it in her jewelry box after she was gone.” She gave a small sniff. “I think she would like it if she knew you had it.”

I stared at the pendant. It wasn’t my style, but it was quite pretty, and I knew it meant a lot to Grandma Gibson to give it to me. “Thank you,” I said, giving her a kiss. “I’ll take good care of it.”

She gave a sad little smile. “And I hope it does the same for you.”

As I fastened the pendant around my neck, I wondered if Grandma Gibson believed that vampires were burned by silver. I knew for a fact that they were. To vampires, touching silver was like picking up a piece of white hot iron. It immediately began to burn their skin. Was there a double meaning behind her present? It didn’t really matter. Either way, it was a generous gift and one I’m sure she found difficult to part with. The glass of the pendant made a gentle click as it tapped against the Pools of Light pendant that Jessie had given me.

We did make-your-own mini-pizzas for dinner. It was something fun and not that much of a hassle, plus Grandma Gibson adored pizza. I guess there weren’t that many pizza places around when she was growing up, so it still seemed like an exotic food to her.

Toward the end of dinner, mom started acting a bit twitchy. She had her cell phone on the table—something that she never did—and I could literally see her restraining herself from checking it every thirty seconds. Finally, Grandma Gibson said, “Oh, for crying out loud, Helen. Go ahead and call him. We don’t mind.”

Mom flashed us an embarrassed smile. “Thanks,” she said, snatching up her phone and getting to her feet. “It’s just ...” Her cheeks had bright pink spots on them. “It’s just, Danny’s been hinting around, and I think tonight might be the night.”

I really would have preferred to meet my mother’s boyfriend and get to know him a little before he stuck a ring on her finger, but she was so happy and excited that I bit my tongue and managed to say, “Don’t worry about us, Mom. I’ll do the dishes. Go give him a call.”

As Mom scampered out of the room, Grandma Gibson got to her feet. "I'll help you with the dishes," she said.

"Please don't worry about it, Grams," I told her. "There's not that much."

"I don't mind. At my age, it's nice to feel useful once in a while," she insisted. "And besides, I'd like to spend some time with you."

I couldn't argue with that, so we both stood at the sink, scraping plates and running the water. "So, what's Mr. Lighton like?" I asked.

"He's very courtly," she told me. "He has a kind sense of humor. He likes to tease, but he's never cruel."

"That's good," I said. I never liked guys who thought being a little bit of a jerk was a form of affection.

"I wish you could have met him," she said, pulling one of the plates off the drying rack and rubbing it with a towel.

"That's okay. I'll meet him next time."

"I don't think so." Grandma Gibson set the plate down rather suddenly. It made a sharp clunk against the counter. "I don't know how to tell you this, but I think this is going to be the last time we ever see each other."

I turned to face her. "What are you talking about?" I felt a cold fear creeping up my spine. "Are you trying to tell me you think you're going to ..." I couldn't complete the sentence.

"No." She shook her head. "It's not me, dear." Reaching out, she squeezed my arm. "I keep trying to protect you. I keep trying to warn you of the horrible danger that you're in." Her voice had a quaver in it. "But you won't listen. For whatever reason, you can't listen. I don't understand why, but I've come to realize that I have to accept it."

My stomach clenched. Grandma Gibson had predicted my death before. She hated the Vanderlinds with a passion and had done everything she could think of to separate me from Jessie. But this was different. She wasn't fighting me or trying to warn me. She was just telling me goodbye. "Are you saying you've seen my future? You've seen my death?" I asked, my voice sounding so small. It didn't sound like me at all.

“No,” she said patting my arm. “No, I haven’t seen that. I’ve stopped looking. But I’ve seen my own future.” She looked me straight in the eyes. “You’re not in it. I know this will be the last time we see each other.” Then she turned her gaze away. “There is no doubt in my mind that this is the last time.”

I fought the urge to cry. I could feel the tears welling up in my eyes, and I blinked them back down again and again. Mom came back in the room all smiles and looked at the two of us. “What’s going on?” she asked.

“I was giving Aurora some life advice, and I think I struck a chord,” Grams told her. She took a few steps toward my mother. “Helen, I’m feeling tired. Would you mind taking me back now?”

“Of course,” Mom said, her sunny expression turning to one of mild concern. She glanced briefly in my direction before asking, “Are you feeling unwell? You can stay the night here, if you think the ride will tire you.”

“No, no,” Grandma Gibson said. “There’s no reason to worry. I’m just a bit tired and want to lie down in my own bed.”

“Okay,” Mom said. “I’ll get your coat.” Looking over at me, she asked, “Aurora, would you like to come with us? I was planning on going over to Danny’s after dropping Grams off. You can meet him if you feel like it.”

“Not if he’s planning on popping the question,” I told her, busying myself with finishing up the dishes.

Mom pursed her lips. “Won’t it be a little strange if I get engaged before my daughter has met my fiancé?” she asked.

“That will be a little strange,” I told her. “But I’ll get over it.” I jerked my chin toward the door. “Go and have fun.”

“Is Jessie coming over later?” she asked, wanting to go but not sure if she was doing the right thing.

“I’m sure he’ll be here after dark,” Grandma Gibson said under her breath as she struggled into her winter coat.

Once she was buttoned up, I came over to give Grandma Gibson a hug. “Thank you for the necklace, Grams,” I stammered, wondering if I’d ever

see her again. "I'll cherish it forever."

Grandma Gibson wrapped her arms around me in a fierce hug. "I want you to know that I love you," she whispered in my ear. "I loved you as my sister, and I love you as my great granddaughter."

"I love you too, Grams," I told her. "Goodbye."

"Goodbye, Lettie," she said, giving me an extra squeeze before releasing me and quickly heading for the door.

After they left, I went to the living room, sat on the couch, and cried. It's not like Grandma Gibson hadn't said strange stuff to me before, but I guess everything that had been happening in the last few weeks caught up with me. I just cried and cried to the point that I didn't think I could stop. I remembered that Mom had opened a bottle of Chianti for her to sip during dinner, so went back to the kitchen. I chugged a few gulps straight from the bottle. It wasn't something I would normally do, but at least it helped calm me down a little.

I wanted my mind to go numb, but it just kept on thinking. Was Grandma Gibson right? Were we never going to see each other again? Did that mean she thought I was going to die?

I lay down on the couch and stared at the television. It took at least two minutes before I realized it wasn't on. She'd said she wasn't predicting my future, she was predicting her own. I had to give her credit; it was a new twist as far as freaky fortune-telling great grandma was concerned.

But Grandma Gibson had to be wrong about the future. She'd been wrong before. She'd been wrong about me never returning from Budapest. In a way, she knew things about the future, but she also didn't know everything. I rubbed at my cheek over and over again like a baby trying to soothe herself to sleep.

Maybe she could only see one possible future, I thought. But the future has a billion different possibilities. Anything could happen, if that was the case. I could miss a light and avoid getting mowed down by a bus or make the light and end up a pile of carnage on the pavement. A person could go crazy running different scenarios over and over again in her head. Maybe that was one of the things that had been forcing Grandma Gibson deeper

and deeper into dementia. Maybe she had to believe in a definite future to keep herself from going mad.

It was dark outside but still pretty early. If Jessie was going to come see me, it probably wouldn't be until after nine. I decided a hot bath might feel good and clear my head. Plus, it would spare me the indignity of a shower cap if I wanted to get clean but wasn't up to facing the challenge of my hair.

Even if our house was kind of crappy, at least we had a nice tub. I usually didn't indulge in a soak because I knew it ran up our water bill, but I decided that as a Christmas treat, I should be allowed one. I pinned my hair up while filling the bath, adding a dash of soap for bubbles. Then I stripped down and climbed in.

Time in the bath was exactly what I needed. I hadn't even realized I had a giant knot in my neck until it started to unknot. I savored the waste of water, playing with the bubbles. It was so much easier to shave my legs in the bath than in the shower. Once the water grew tepid, I still lingered in the bathroom, moisturizing and trimming my nails. It was all pretty mindless, but it helped me feel better.

I was padding around my room in my robe and a pair of fresh panties when I heard a soft knock at my bedroom window. I froze in mid-stride, my eyes racing over to the clock. It was not yet even eight, a very unlikely time for Jessie to call. Plus, with an open invitation to our home, I was getting used to him using the front door.

"Aurora," a male voice called softly. "It's Jessie."





## Chapter 26

With my heart pounding in my chest, I hurried over to the window and peeked out between the curtains. Jessie was standing on the porch roof looking out into the night. A breeze had kicked up his coat, and it swirled around his legs.

Hurriedly, I opened the window. “Jessie,” I called to him. I shivered, my body still damp. It was damn cold out. “Come in.”

He shook his head. “No,” he told me. “I’d better not.”

“Jessie,” I said, allowing annoyance to creep into my voice as I stood there in my flimsy robe. “I’m just out of the bath, and I’m not going to freeze to death talking through an open window. Now, get in the house.”

Immediately complying, Jessie quickly closed the window and shut the drapes once he was inside. Before he could say another word, I wrapped my arms around his neck and kissed him. I think he intended to say something immediately, but instead he took a moment to relish the kiss. And so did I, for that matter. I was acutely aware of my state of near undress.

When we finally broke apart, he bent his head, pressing his forehead to mine, and said in a ragged whisper, “Aurora, we need to talk.”

I shook my head. “No,” I told him. I knew if we talked, he would tell me something I didn’t want to hear. I tried to pull him in for another kiss.

“Please?” he asked. “It’s important.”

“Let me give you your Christmas present,” I said, stalling. “It is Christmas, you know.” My robe had inched open a little, and I felt his gaze lingering over my body.

Jessie closed his eyes, trying to stay focused on his task. “Aurora,” he tried again.

“No,” I insisted, slipping out of his arms. I went over to my dresser and picked up the small box that I had gone to great pains to wrap. “Here.” I thrust it at him. “It’s probably not even something you want, but you’re really challenging to shop for.”

Jessie gave a small sigh and took a seat on the bed. “Okay,” he said and reached out for the present I was forcing on him. He looked at the paper package in his hands for several seconds before deftly untaping one end and sliding out the box. I thought he would put the paper to one side, but instead he carefully flattened it and then tucked it in the breast pocket of his coat.

Pulling the lid off the box, he gazed at the smartphone, his eyebrows drawn down in the middle. “It’s a phone,” I finally said after receiving no reaction from him for almost a minute. “It’s a cell phone. A smartphone,” I quickly added.

He looked up at me. “I thought we agreed to a price cap of one hundred dollars.”

“I know,” I said, sitting down next to him. “I lied.”

Jessie pinched his lips together, giving me a stern look. I couldn't tell if he was annoyed or amused. “Thank you,” he finally said. “I guess it was time for me to enter the modern age.” I thought his use of the past tense was weird but decided not to ask why. I didn’t want to lead our conversation down any dark alleys.

He reached in the side pocket of his coat and pulled out a small, purple velvet box. “This is for you,” he said, presenting it to me.

I stared at the box. It had one of those lids that flip up. I could tell from the size and shape that it was either a ring or earrings. Jessie had already given me a ridiculously expensive engagement ring when we had to pretend to be engaged for our trip to Budapest. I’d tried to give it back to him, but he’d refused. I ran a finger over the soft lid. Maybe it was earrings.

“Open it,” Jessie said, giving me a nudge.

Despite everything, I felt a wave of excitement. I couldn’t help it. Jessie always gave me such pretty jewelry. With slightly trembling hands, I flipped open the top.

Inside was a ring. If I was being honest, it wasn’t the prettiest piece of jewelry Jessie had ever given me. But I could tell it was very old, and maybe that accounted for it looking a little weird to me. I probably had more modern tastes.

The ring was heart shaped with a spring green stone in the center that was surrounded by some roughly cut clear stones. I remembered reading once that very old diamond rings had stones that were surprisingly un-uniform. I looked at Jessie. "Are these stones what I think they are?" I asked him.

He nodded. "They're old mine cut," he told me, as if I knew what that meant. "And the center stone is a green garnet."

"Oh," I said, half frowning to myself. I hadn't realized garnets came in any other color but red. I narrowed my eyes at him. "I thought we agreed not to spend more than a hundred dollars on gifts for each other."

He shrugged. "I lied." Then he added, "And besides, I didn't exactly buy this. It's part of a family collection."

"Oh," I said. I wasn't sure if that made me like the ring more or less. It still puzzled me.

"My uncle, Dorian's father, used to collect items people crafted as protection against vampires."

"Okay." I wondered if the green garnet was somehow repellant to vampires. But it didn't seem to bother Jessie. "Isn't that a little odd? His collecting that sort of stuff, I mean."

"It is a little odd," he admitted. "But many people obsess over collecting odd things, and vampires always have a lot of time on their hands."

I took the ring out of the box to examine it closer. When viewed through the lens of history, it had a subtle beauty. "I don't understand how this would repel a vampire," I had to admit.

"Well, let me tell you the story of the ring first," he insisted. "Do you know who the Marquis de Sade was?"

"Um." I really had no idea where he was going with the conversation. It seemed like a bit of a left turn. "Wasn't he some French guy that enjoyed torturing people when he had sex with them?"

"That's his modern reputation," Jessie had to admit. "He was also an author, a philosopher, and a revolutionary politician."

“Okay,” I said, for lack of anything else to say. The marquis could be as intelligent as he wanted, but that still didn’t justify torture.

“He was also a vampire,” Jessie told me.

I was used to Jessie revealing that all sorts of famous and infamous people throughout history had connections to the undead, so hearing that the guy who had the word “sadism” coined after him because of his exploits was a vampire didn’t surprise me too much. “I believe you,” I said.

“The Marquis was a very complex man,” Jessie went on. “Unfortunately, he caused a lot of suffering. But he did have one great love, Anne-Prospère de Launay. She was so devoted to the Marquis that she signed a love oath to him in her own blood. He gave this ring to her for protection.”

“This exact ring?” I asked, feeling a little flabbergasted. I wasn’t sure of the exact time period for the Marquis de Sade, but I knew it had to have been at least a couple hundred years ago. I looked down at the ring. “I don’t understand. How would it protect her?”

“Because of the Marquis’s unusual appetites, he was concerned that he would get carried away and kill Anne-Prospère. He had this ring custom made.” Jessie reached over and did something to the ring that caused the top to flip open on an invisible hinge. Underneath was a gray-brown stone set into the ring’s base. The stone had been sharpened into a vicious-looking point.

“What is that?” I asked.

“Fossilized wood,” Jessie told me. “It’s extremely dangerous for vampires. Even just a small scratch would cause a member of the undead horrible pain. We can’t heal from it. At least not easily. Even a small scratch can be quite deadly.”

I blinked at the fossil, impressed. “And this is something the Marquis gave his girlfriend?”

“Well, yes, but she wasn’t exactly his girlfriend. She was his wife’s sister,” Jessie said with a small cough.

That piece of information wasn’t doing much to help me enjoy my Christmas present. “That sounds kind of twisted.”

“Yes, like I said, he was complex. But when he gave this ring to her, he said that if she ever truly feared that he was going to end her life, she should use it on him without hesitation.”

“Um, Jessie?” I said, my stomach suddenly feeling sour. “Are you trying to tell me that there’s a chance you might try to kill me and if you do, I should stake you?”

“No,” Jessie said, letting his hands fall limply to his sides. “I’m saying that after tonight, I can’t ever see you again, and I wanted to leave you with something that might give you a small ounce of protection in case other vampires ....” His words faded.

“You ...?” I felt myself break out into a cold sweat. “What ...?” I stammered. “Jessie, please don’t start all this again.”

“It’s not me,” he said rather fiercely. “It’s my grandfather. He has forbidden me to ever see you again. I had to plead with him to come here tonight so that I could at least tell you goodbye.”

“I don’t understand. How can your grandfather keep us apart?” Tears were welling in my eyes, and I did nothing to stop them.

“He’s my maker,” Jessie said, sounding despondent. “I have to obey him.”

“Then just lie,” I told him. “Just tell him we’re no longer together.”

“It’s not like that,” Jessie insisted, sadly shaking his head. “I wish it could be that simple, but very, very few vampires are able to even slightly resist the command of their maker. I don’t understand why, but we find it physically impossible.”

“And your grandfather told you that you have to end things with me?” I wiped angrily at a few tears sliding down my cheeks.

“I promised him that I would never see you again, and he promised me to spare your life.”

I gulped. Jessie’s grandfather wanted me dead, and our permanent separation was the only way to prevent him from killing me. I didn’t understand. How could a grandfather not want his own grandson’s

happiness? “But did you explain to him?” I said, my throat feeling tight. “Did you try to explain about us?”

“He already knew some things,” Jessie said, taking my hands. “I don’t know how he found out.”

“But how is he even alive?” I wanted to know. The man had been missing for eighty years.

“When they dumped him in the water, he was shackled but somehow managed to get free. He found a piece of wreckage that was floating in the ocean. It was part of a ship, I think. I guess it was enough for him to be able to mostly conceal himself from daylight. Not completely though because his skin has been horribly disfigured.”

I guess that explained how the man looked both young and old. “How long was he out there?” I asked.

“Years,” was the reply. “Decades.” Jessie ran his fingers through his hair a few times. “He was always a volatile man, but I’m afraid so much time alone made him lose whatever small portion of compassion he still harbored in his heart.”

“Does he know what happened?” I asked. “Does he know how he was discovered on the ship and thrown overboard?”

“No,” Jessie said. “He might suspect, but I think he would have killed my mother already if he knew. She’s never spoken of it to anyone but me. She’s never even told the rest of our family.”

A thought occurred to me. “Is he the one that’s been grabbing people? Liz and Don and Mervin? Are they all dead now?”

Jessie opened his mouth to reply but then stopped. He gave me a look of consternation then drew breath to try again, meeting with the same lack of success. It was painful to watch him struggle, like when someone has a severe stutter and can’t quite get the words out. I was confused for a few moments and then asked, “Are you not allowed to tell me?”

Jessie nodded, his body ceasing to strain.

“Did your maker say you weren’t allowed to talk about the missing people?”

I could see him searching around in his head for words that he could say without directly going against his grandfather's orders. He finally stated, "There are certain topics that I've been forbidden to discuss."

I gave that some thought, then tried, "If you were able to answer me freely, would I be very upset?"

Jessie opened his mouth and then froze. Shutting his jaw, he began thinking again. "I hate it when you're upset," he said. "I'm glad that there is no news I could tell you that would upset you."

I took that in. He was trying to tell me that Mervin and the kids were still alive. "Are they still in Tiburon?" I asked.

This question proved easier for Jessie to answer. "I believe my grandfather has spent most of his time in Tiburon since his return."

They were still here. Held captive somewhere, but still alive and still in Tiburon. That meant they could still be found. "Is there any hint you can give me that will tell me where they are?"

He shook his head. "If I had any secrets to share, I would find a way to share them," was his reply. Jessie didn't know where they were. He might have had his suspicions, but he didn't know.

I thought about never seeing Jessie again. I thought about the precious minutes laid out before us being the last we had left. "If your grandfather died, then would we be able to be together?" I wanted to know.

"I'm not sure," Jessie said. "But it is unlikely he will die within your lifetime. There is no way I can think of that I would be able to kill him, however much I want to."

I started feeling a bit frantic. I didn't know how I was going to make it from day to day without Jessie in my life. I must have felt like an addict did when denied his drug of choice. I felt like I would go crazy if I had to live without him. "Can we at least write to each other?" I asked.

Sighing, Jessie put his arms around me. He pulled me close and rested his chin on my head. "I am not allowed to correspond with Aurora Keys."

This gave me an idea, and I looked up at him. "But what if you didn't write to Aurora Keys?" I wanted to know. "What if you were writing to

Colette Gibson?" I had a passport with Colette's name on it, after all. "I could set up a post box in another town. You could write to Colette, and she could write to you."

"That might work," Jessie said, thinking it over. "We do get a lot of mail at the castle. Especially from young ladies who should really know better. Viggo usually throws it out, but I could express a new interest."

"I have some blue stationery," I told him. "You could know a letter is from me if it comes in a pale blue envelope."

"This might work," he said, giving me a squeeze and smiling down at me. Then his smile faded. "Maybe we shouldn't even try."

"Why not?" I demanded. I thought I'd seen a ray of hope that Jessie was now trying to extinguish.

"Maybe I should just let you go," he said. "It's not fair of me to keep you tied to me. I should let you go so that you can move on with your life."

"Do you really think that's going to happen?" I asked, looking into his eyes. "Do you seriously believe that a month from now or a year from now or even ten years from now that I will have forgotten you?"

"No, I just ..." Jessie closed his eyes and pressed his forehead against mine. "I just want what's best for you."

"Then we'll write," I said. "We'll figure something out."

Jessie nodded. "There is one more thing."

"There's more?" I said, exasperated. "Your grandfather hasn't taken enough away from us?"

"This is for me," he said.

"What?"

He drew in a deep breath and then said, "I need you to take back your invitation. I need to no longer be welcome in your home."

"No," I told him, instantly against it. There was something about his request that felt too final. "I don't understand the point."

Jessie held me close. "I know this is hard to understand, but if my grandfather knew that I had an open invitation to your home, he might use it



against us.”

“How?” I asked. “You made your deal. You won’t see me again, and he can’t hurt me. Why do I have to take back the invitation?”

“Because I was only able to make the deal for you,” Jessie told me. I could tell it pained him to explain things to me, but he forced himself. “Your mother, any mortal visitor to your home ... They would all be in danger. If my grandfather commanded me to ...” His words trailed off as he was unwilling to paint me too detailed of a picture.

Jessie took my face in both of his hands. His beautiful gray eyes were filled with pain. “Say the words,” he whispered. He kissed me fiercely but then quickly pulled away again. “Say the words to banish me from your home.”

“I will say them,” I told him, gently pulling his hands away from my face. I knew he was only thinking of the safety of me and my loved ones. “I promise you I will take back my invitation, but there’s one thing I need you to do for me first,” I said, getting to my feet.

I had a plan. It was a good plan, as far as I was concerned. But I didn’t know if I could force myself to do it. It was something I wanted so deeply and had wanted from almost the first moment I saw Jessie. This was our last chance. After this, we would probably never see each other again. I needed this to happen. I needed the memory to keep me warm on cold and lonely nights. I had to force myself to be brazen.

“What?” Jessie asked, his eyes wide as he looked up at me, observing my internal struggle.

I undid the tie on my robe and let it fall open. “I need you to make love to me.”

## **Chapter 27**

I stood there with my robe open, my bare breasts exposed. Besides my robe, I was only wearing a pair of pink cotton panties. I couldn't believe I was standing before Jessie, naked, and asking him to be with me. I had no idea what he was thinking. Jessie was in many ways very traditional, and I wondered if such a bold move on my part would repel him.

"Aurora," Jessie gasped, leaping to his feet and sweeping me up in his arms. "I've wanted this for so long."

I felt an inward thrill of relief. He wanted me. He wasn't going to immediately flee out the window.

"But are you sure, my darling?" he asked, laying me down on the bed. "Will this be too painful? You can be with me now, but never again. Will it hurt too much after I'm gone?"

"Jessie," I said, linking my arms around his neck. "Your leaving me will be painful no matter what. But if we have to be separated, then at least give me this memory." I looked up at him shyly. "Please."

Jessie needed no more encouragement. He stripped off his long coat rather vigorously and flung it on the floor. He went to kiss me and then jerked away. "What?" I asked, a little surprised.

"Are you wearing silver?" he asked.

I remembered the gift my great grandmother had just given me. "Sorry," I said, quickly undoing the clasp and laying the necklace on the night stand. "Grandma Gibson just gave it to me." I almost added that it used to be Lettie's but stopped myself. There was no reason to bring her up at that exact moment.

Jessie squinted at the pendant for a moment as if it looked familiar to him. Then he lay down on top of me, the full length of his body pressing against mine. I could feel how aroused he was. The knowledge made me squirm a little underneath him, and when I shifted, he let out a low moan. "Oh, my darling," he whispered, kissing me deeply.

Eventually, his kisses moved lower, trailing down my neck and stopping at my left nipple. When he took my breast in his mouth, I let out a sharp gasp of pleasure, causing Jessie to tense up. "Aurora, your mother," he hissed.

“She’s out for the night,” I assured him, writhing underneath him, wanting every sexual sensation he was willing to provide.

Jessie smiled a wicked smile then lowered his head again to my breast.

My heart was broken. The thought of never seeing Jessie again was more than I could stand. But I didn’t want to ruin our beautiful night together with tears. I wanted to savor every second. So I took the knowledge that this was the last I would ever see of my beautiful Jessie Vanderlind and hid it away in my brain somewhere. I compartmentalized it to be examined and mourned at some time in the future. To quote Scarlett O’Hara, I told myself, “I’ll think about that tomorrow.”

There was a sea of pleasure to keep me distracted. The slightest touch from Jessie’s hand had always caused tingles to run up my spine, so having him kissing my practically naked body was driving me wild.

Jessie was wearing a deep blue cashmere sweater with a crisp white shirt underneath. I grabbed his sweater and tugged it over his head. When I reached for the buttons on his shirt, he lightly brushed my hands away and then ripped his shirt open, scattering mother-of-pearl buttons across the floor.

Jessie’s chest was smooth and sculpted. The feeling of his flesh against mine was amazing, and my body jerked and writhed in response.

“Do we need protection?” Jessie asked as his fingers dipped down beneath my panties, causing me to lift my hips up off the mattress, desperate to get closer. “Is that something we should talk about?”

“I thought you said vampires couldn’t have children once they were turned,” I said, forcing my brain to think rationally about what he’d just asked me. It was a struggle.

“We can’t,” he said, raising his head from where he was kissing my belly.

I tangled my fingers in his hair. “Then let’s not worry.”

Jessie stripped my panties from me and tossed them on the floor. His kisses moved lower until he reached a very sweet spot. There his tongue and lips took up a rhythm that left me howling with pleasure. It was my first

experience with any kind of climax, and I was astounded at how acutely, excruciatingly wonderful it felt.

When my body stopped convulsing, Jessie rested his head on my stomach while he let me catch my breath. I could tell he was smiling. “I knew it would be like this for us,” he said. “I knew you would be this sweet.”

I forced my brain not to think about the fact that this would be the only time we would be together. This short burst of passion was all that was meant for us.

Jessie started kissing my body again, this time moving up my right side, pausing to give my right breast some attention. I began pushing at the top of his pants, letting him know that he should no longer be wearing them. He kicked off his boots and obediently shed his pants onto the floor.

I’d never seen much in terms of the naked male physique. The statue of David was one of my few references. Besides the fact that Jessie was aroused and David was not, the vampire could definitely have given Michelangelo’s imagining of the perfect male specimen a run for his money.

“Oh, Jessie,” I said to him. “Please. Let’s be together now.”

He moved on top of me, my skin thrilling to the feel of his completely naked body against mine. “Are you sure, my darling? I understand that this might hurt a little.”

I knew that when a girl lost her virginity there was frequently pain and some blood. The idea usually frightened me a little. But my desire to be with Jessie easily outweighed any qualms I would normally have had. “I’m ready,” I whispered, positioning my legs so that he was between my thighs.

I felt the pressure of him at the very base of me. He felt cool and firm. I had no real reference point of comparison, but I had the impression he was quite large. I felt the electric thrill of him sliding slowly inside me and my body spreading to accommodate him. When he came up against the proof of my virginity, he paused. I knew he was reluctant to hurt me, even in this.

“Yes,” I said, lifting my hips a little, letting him know that it was all right.

With a decisive thrust, Jessie broke through the barrier and was fully inside me. There was pain. A hot, searing, tearing pain. But it was quickly obliterated by waves of pleasure cascading over me. “Yes,” I repeated, letting him know that I was all right. I lifted my hips again. I needed him to keep going.

Our bodies quickly found a rhythm of him rising inside of me and then me rising to meet each thrust. It had a tempo; it was a dance; it made me understand what I had been craving all those nights when I’d lain awake, twisting in the sheets and thinking of him. It was better than anything I had ever imagined. He rose; then I rose. He rose; then I rose. We went on and on and on together in perfect harmony.

The pleasure kept building and building inside of me. It started at my base, where Jessie and I were connected, and then spread from there. It kept getting bigger and bigger until I knew exactly how it felt to be a cork in a bottle desperately trying to contain the pressure behind a burst of champagne.

“Hold on,” he whispered in my ear as he moved inside of me again, plunging even deeper. “Try to stay with me a little longer.”

I wanted to tell him that I would, but the mere act of trying to speak was impossible. I made a small whimpering noise and then it was like the cork had been forced out of the bottle by millions of sparkling bubbles. My body began to convulse, and an intense wail escaped from my lips.

Knowing I was climaxing must have pushed Jessie over the edge because he began convulsing too, thrusting into me so deeply that he was practically lifting me from the mattress.

Our wild thrashing slowed to trembling then to small shivers. Jessie rested his head against my breasts. We both started giggling a bit hysterically and then shivered again.

Eventually, Jessie went to withdraw himself from me and I stopped him, locking my arms around him and whimpering, “No.” I didn’t want it to be over. I never wanted it to end.

“Aurora,” he said, kissing me lightly on the lips. “You will always be my first, my last, my only love.”

“But ...” I tried to speak, but he silenced me with another kiss.

“It pains me, but I must leave,” he said, shifting off of me. “I can already feel my grandfather growing impatient,” he explained. “I do not want him to come looking for me.” Jessie started hunting for his clothes. “That would be very bad.”

I gathered my robe around me, suddenly feeling modest after being so incredibly immodest. “Promise me we’ll try to be together,” I said, catching at his arm. “Promise me that we’ll figure something out.”

He took me by both arms and kissed me very firmly. “I promise you that I’ll try,” he whispered against my forehead. “With every fiber of my being, I will try.” He moved his head to look into my eyes. “But I want you to know that the chances are very slim. If I had any sense of decency, I would tell you not to hold out any hope.” He turned his face away from me. “But I can’t do it. I’m a coward in that, I’ll admit.”

“Don’t say that,” I told him, pressing as tightly against him as I could. Jessie was the bravest and most noble person I had ever met.

He returned my embrace, and we stood there, arms wrapped around each other, swaying slightly back and forth. Then Jessie went rigid. I looked up and saw a pained expression on his face. “I have to go,” he said.

“Now?” I didn’t want to release him from my arms.

“Yes,” Jessie said, firmly untangling himself from my grasp. “This very minute. I should have never stayed.” He hurried into the rest of his clothes. “Even for something as beautiful as what we just shared.”

“No,” I cried out, but I didn’t try to stop him as he strode to the window. The grim expression on his face told me there was nothing I could do.

“Goodbye, my love,” Jessie said as he climbed out the window to crouch on the roof. “I know this is hard, but you have to be brave. Please say the words now.” He looked me directly in the eyes, and I could see the pain he was suffering. “Please rescind your invitation.”

Every inch of my body wanted to protest. To rescind my invitation just felt too final. It felt wrong. But I knew Jessie was only asking for my own safety. I knew he wouldn’t make me do it unless it was a matter of life or

death. I drew breath and said in a trembling voice, "Jessie Vanderlind, you are not longer welcome in this home. I take back my invitation."

Jessie flinched, as if he'd been struck. "Thank you," he said in a very faint voice. He extended his hand toward me, reaching for me, but then froze. I hurried toward the open window, but I was too late. In the brief few seconds it took me to cross the room, he was gone.



## **Chapter 28**

“Aurora,” my mom said. She was sitting on my bed and rubbing my arm, trying to wake me. I was ignoring her. I knew she probably wanted to tell me about her proposal or something and I just wasn’t in the mood to listen to somebody else’s good news.

“Gahmph ...” I told her, rolling onto my stomach.

I really hadn’t had much sleep. After Jessie had left I had straightened the room, hiding my soiled panties and gathering up his scattered buttons. It was impossible for me to continue denying the fact that Jessie and I might never see each other again. My heart was broken.

“Aurora, I know you don’t want to, but I need you to wake up.” Mom’s voice was sharp yet fragile. It was not the voice of a woman wanting to gush over a diamond engagement ring.

“What?” I said, rolling over and sitting up. “What’s wrong?”

“I have bad news, sweetie.” I could tell by the way her voice had a slight tremble that it was very bad. “And when I tell it to you, I need you to be very strong. Okay? I need you to focus.”

“Okay.” I nodded, panic racing up my spine and becoming caught in my throat. “But I need you to tell me. You’re freaking me out.”

“I just had a call from Mrs. Lighton,” Mom said. “Fred’s missing.”

“What?” I shrieked. “No! He can’t ... No.”

My mother ignored my flash of hysterics and spoke over me. “He went out with a few friends last night. They apparently were in some woods drinking beer. Fred stepped away from the others for a moment to empty his bladder, and that was the last anyone saw him.”

I tried to take it in. Fred and some guys were out drinking in some woods. That was probably a place we high schoolers called the Tib. It was a little spit of land on the Tiburon River. Or maybe they were on Vanderlind property outside the castle, the woods where Colette had disappeared so long ago.

“What do you need from me?” I asked as tears spilled down my cheeks.

“I need you to answer some questions very honestly,” Mom said. “I know some are going to sound like accusations, but they’re not. We just need to gather as much information as we can as quickly as we can.”

“Okay,” I said, doing my best to stay calm.

“Were you out with Fred and his friends last night?”

“No,” I said. I didn’t understand why she was asking me, but I knew she was just trying to get information quickly. “I was here all night.”

“Do you know anyone who would have any reason to want to hurt Fred?”

My brain instantly flashed upon Dorian Vanderlind. He was definitely bumping heads with Fred on Christmas Eve. But were a few insults and getting splashed with soda worth killing someone? Maybe not to a normal, rational human being, but was it to a vampire? I tried to think. Jessie trusted his cousin implicitly, so it couldn’t have been Dorian.

“Aurora?” my mom said, prompting me to answer.

“No,” I told her. “Not that I can think of.”

“Did Jessie bring a guest to Blossom’s party the other night? His cousin or something? Someone who didn’t get along with Fred?” she asked. “A few boys said that there was almost a fight.”

“No, it was stupid,” I told her, probably a bit too hurriedly. “Fred just splashed the guy with some soda. He’s Jessie’s cousin; he’s not going to try to take revenge for something like that.”

“Okay, but I’m going to need Jessie’s number. I know the Vanderlinds like to keep their privacy and have their number unlisted, but they’re going to have to make an exception.”

I didn’t know what to do. It had to have been Jessie’s grandfather that grabbed Fred. There was no doubt in my mind. Fred was a strong, vigorous young man. He wouldn’t be taken easily by mortals. Not without his friends at least hearing something. It had to have been a vampire. But would having an upset mother calling the castle prompt Grandpa Vanderlind to spare Fred or kill him? I didn’t know.

“Aurora?” Mom interrupted my thoughts again. “The number?”

“I’m sorry,” I told her. “I’m having trouble thinking clearly.” I hopped out of bed and went to my desk. Grabbing a scrap of paper, I hesitated for a moment and then scrawled down a number. Jessie’s cell phone number.

“I need to head over to the castle this morning to pick up my car, anyway,” I said. “So I can always ask Jessie if there’s any chance his cousin

did something stupid. He wouldn't lie to me."

"Your car's in our garage," Mom said, giving me a concerned look.

"Oh, right." Jessie must have returned it and forgotten to tell me. "I meant to say sweater," I said lamely. "I guess my brain isn't working right."

"It's okay," Mom said, her voice soft and understanding. She got up from the bed and wrapped her arms around me. "I can't even imagine ... I don't want to even imagine ..." Her words trailed off. "Just be careful," she said, kissing me on the head.

Mom left the room and I just sat there stunned. I didn't know what I was going to do, but I knew I had to do something. I had to try to save Fred. I had to try to save everyone, but it was the thought of Fred dying at the hands of a vampire that really drove me forward. I was going to find out where Grandpa Vanderlind was keeping them and set them free even if it killed me.

I got dressed while my mom called back Mrs. Lighton. I found Fred's earrings in the pocket of my bag and put them on. They were much prettier than I deserved. Fred was trapped somewhere being slowly drained of his life, and it was my fault. If I'd just been willing to date him instead of chasing after a vampire then this probably wouldn't have happened.

After that, I burrowed into the back of my closet to find my old backpack. If I was going to accomplish what I hoped to accomplish, I needed to carry a few supplies. A backpack was just a more efficient way to go when I needed my hands free.

When I got downstairs, I immediately checked the garage. My battered gold bug was there, freshly washed and gleaming. I could see my bag on the passenger's side seat, but the doors were all locked. We had a spare set of keys somewhere, but I had no idea where.

"Mom," I said, walking into the kitchen. "Do you know where ..."

"Your keys are?" she asked, holding up my set of keys, clinking together as they dangled off their chain.

"Where did you find them?" I asked, taking the keys from her.

“In the refrigerator, next to the half and half,” she told me, giving me an amused look. “That’s pretty absentminded, by the way.”

Jessie must have put them there, knowing that my mom would find them when she went to add cream to her coffee in the morning. I glanced into the next room and saw that my winter coat was hanging on a hook near the front door. I had no idea that Jessie had ever left my bedroom. Or maybe he’d returned everything before knocking at my window. I gave a small shiver. Vampires were so stealthy. Maybe it was a good thing that Jessie was no longer granted access to our home. I knew he would never intentionally hurt me, but maybe his grandfather would think of a way to manipulate him.

“Are you sure you’re all right, honey?” Mom asked. “You’re acting really out of it.”

“No, I’m fine,” I assured her. “I’m just really worried about Fred.” When I said his name, my voice cracked. Fred was being held prisoner somewhere in Tiburon by an insane vampire. I started crying. I couldn’t stop myself. I didn’t know what to do or how to help him. Should I tell my mom? How would that end? How could I explain everything to her while making it clear that I hadn’t lost my mind?

Mom came over and put her arms around me, which made my crying worse. “I really need to talk to Jessie,” I said between sobs.

“Maybe you should call,” she suggested. “Or at least wait until you’ve calmed down a little. I don’t like you driving when you’re upset. It’s dangerous.”

I took her advice and had some breakfast before heading out. People always tell you don’t text and drive, but there should be another rule: don’t cry and drive.

Over my meal, I noticed my mother’s left hand was bare of any kind of ring. Did that mean Danny didn’t propose? I wanted to know but also couldn’t stop worrying about Fred. Finally, I just plunged in. “Any big announcements you need to tell me?” I looked pointedly at my mom’s hand as she sat and sipped her coffee.

Mom set down the pile of work papers she was browsing. “The big news is we’ve decided to wait. We want our families to get to know each

other before we make any decisions about combining houses.”

“That’s very grown up of you,” I told her. “But please don’t put anything on hold because of me. I’ll be in college next year, so that’ll make combining households a lot easier.”

“I know, sweetie. And I appreciate that,” she told me. “But we are trying to be grown up about it. Thank you for noticing.” She gave me a smile.

Driving to the castle, I noticed my hands were still trembling a little. I pulled the car over, put it in park, and gave myself a good slap across both cheeks. Being a crybaby wasn’t going to save Fred. Or anyone else for that matter. My mom was right; I had to be strong. I had to focus.

As I tooled up to the castle gate, the guard, dressed in his deep purple livery, looked out at me from his little hut. “Hi, I’m Aurora Keys,” I said in a weirdly bright voice. I wondered if he knew who I was.

“Mr. Vanderlind isn’t receiving visitors right now,” he said, looking very dour. “You should know that.”

“I do,” I told him. “But I’m not here to see Jessie. I’m here to speak to Viggo.”

The guard frowned even more. “Listen, kid. Take my advice, and don’t come here to visit anyone. The Vanderlind Castle is no place you want to be. Trust me. I’m leaving as soon as I can find another gig.”

“I appreciate that,” was my reply. “But I still really need to speak to Viggo. Plus, I left my sweater here on Christmas Eve, so I’m going to need to get that back.”

The guard shook his head, obviously deciding I was suicidal. “Let me call up to the house,” he said.

I sat in my bug for what felt like a very long time, but was probably only about ten minutes, before Viggo appeared carrying my sweater in his left hand. His right arm was in a sling. Instead of having the guard open the gate and me driving in, he exited through the pedestrian access and stood

next to my car. "Good morning, Miss Aurora," he said in a very somber voice.

"Good morning, Viggo," I replied. "Are you all right?" I asked, nodding at the sling.

"Yes," he said. "Thank you for asking." And then he added, "Miss Aurora, would you please take a short walk with me?"

I unlocked the car, and he opened the door for me. "What's going on?" I asked when we had moved out of hearing distance of the guard at the gate.

"Things are very bad," he told me. "Mr. Vanderlind is going to make trouble, I'm afraid. He is a very bad man."

"That's why I'm here," I said, keeping my voice low. "I think it's Mr. Vanderlind who has been kidnapping people. Jessie couldn't tell me directly, but he implied that maybe it was."

Viggo gave me a steady look. "I know of no one being held prisoner in the *castle* dungeon," he said, placing a weird amount of emphasis on the word "castle."

"Are you aware of anyone being held prisoner someplace that is not the castle dungeon?" I asked.

The giant frowned, pressing his lips together in thought, and then said, "I have no direct knowledge."

"Are you afraid to say anything?" I asked in a barely audible voice. "Have you been threatened or something?" I wondered if the senior Vanderlind had some type of supernatural control over the giant the way he did over Jessie. It would take someone as powerful as a vampire to intimidate a man of Viggo's size.

"Life at the castle is not as pleasant as it used to be," he said. "I do not see that changing any time soon."

"Can you quit?" I asked, thinking maybe the guard at the gate had a good plan. "Why not just leave?"

"I would hate to leave Mr. Jessie, but if I could figure out a way for Gloria to be free, then I would not stay."

“Is there a lot left on her debt?” I asked rather hesitantly. Gloria had sold herself into service to pay off her father’s debt. I didn’t know if I was being rude by asking.

“Mr. Jessie has cut most of her debt,” he said. “But it is still a large amount. If we both work very hard then maybe when we are old we can leave this place.” He looked away and said in a softer voice, “If we live to be old.”

I put my hand to my cheek and thought it over. There had to be a way they could leave. But vampires took mortal debt very seriously.

I brightened, an idea occurring to me. “Viggo, if a friend was to give you something worth a lot of money. Let’s say it’s valuable antique jewelry or something like that. Something that would probably bring big money in an auction. Would that be enough to help you? Would you and Gloria be able to get away if you had,” I tried to run a quick estimate, “I don’t know, an extra hundred and fifty thousand dollars?”

The giant blinked very slowly at me a few times. “I didn’t know I had that kind of a friend,” he said carefully.

I shrugged. “I think you might.” I would have to explain things to Jessie if I ever got to see him again, but I saw no reason to let gorgeous pieces of jewelry just sit around in a safety deposit box. I’d keep my Pools of Light, of course, but I thought I could part with the other pieces. They were much more expensive, but they had way less sentimental value. Besides, that stupid Grandpa Vanderlind had hurt a giant that I considered a friend, and I wasn’t about to put up with it.

Viggo nodded, mulling the whole thing over. “Yes, I know someone who works at a very famous auction house. He might be able to arrange a quick sale.” He looked me straight in the eyes. “I am sure if I had such a friend, their gift would not be wasted.”

“And if a parcel was to arrive for you, it would be addressed to ... the castle?” I asked.

Viggo shook his head. “It would be better if it was made as a general delivery to the Tiburon post office.”

“I see,” I said, this time nodding at him. “If there’s nothing else you have to tell me, then I guess I’d better get going.” The day was pushing



toward noon, and I had to get to the bank.

“I would tell you to never come back here, but I guess you wouldn’t listen,” Viggo said, giving me a penetrating look.

I thought about Fred locked in some cell, juice box for some nasty old vampire. I thought about Liz and Don and even Mervin, who I didn’t really know personally but saw quite frequently driving his cab around town. “No, I probably wouldn’t listen,” I agreed.

“Miss Aurora, I have learned over the years that the castle has many secrets,” Viggo said, his face very earnest. “There are things about this place that even some of the family doesn’t know. Sometimes you think something is very well hidden, but it’s actually right under your nose.” He tapped his large nose significantly. “If I was sitting in the Vanderlind dungeon, that is something I would think about. That might be a way to find what you are looking for.” He tapped his nose again, giving me a steady gaze.

“So you’re saying I need to search the dungeon?” I asked, trying to divine meaning from his words.

“No, I am saying that if I were you, I should stay very far away from the castle,” he told me, his voice flat and grave.

“But ...” I stammered, not at all sure what he was trying to tell me.

“Miss Aurora, do you remember how we met?” he asked.

“Of course,” I told him. Jessie had sent him to help me drag an unconscious Blossom out of the secret tunnel.

He nodded his head. “I remember it, too.” He nodded some more. “I thought you were a very brave young lady.” He tapped his nose again. “And smart, too.” With that, he turned his head back toward the castle.

I wanted to chase after him. I wanted to yell at him until he gave me some damn information I could actually use. Here I was about to hand over a small fortune in antique jewelry, and the giant was being all cryptic. But then again, the guard was in his little hut watching us. Word would probably get back to Grandpa Vanderlind that I had come by and that Viggo had spoken to me. If he was questioned, even under a vampire’s influence,

Viggo could honestly say that he had told me nothing. He did have his own life to think about. And Gloria's.



## Chapter 29

After leaving Viggo, I headed out of town. When I'd returned from Budapest a month earlier, I had a fake passport, a huge diamond engagement ring, and a moonstone necklace created by a famous French designer. Also a few thousand in euros, all courtesy of Jessie Vanderlind. I didn't know where to keep them, so I drove two towns over and opened a security deposit box in Colette's name using the fake passport as my ID. Colette was conveniently over twenty-one.

Sitting in the bank parking lot, I called the house. My mom didn't pick up, but I left her a message casually mentioning that I had talked to Jessie and he didn't know anything about Fred. Neither did his cousin. If I went missing, I knew my mom would tell the police I was headed over to the castle, and I wanted her to know that I'd left there in one piece. I knew it was stupid that I wanted to protect Jessie even if it put my own life at risk, but that was the way I felt.

After that, I stared at my phone for a long time. I needed to call Jessie and leave him a message, but I really didn't want to. I decided I would wait and just deal with the bank first. It was best to take these things one step at a time.

I took everything out of the safety deposit box but my passport then headed to a drugstore for a box, tape, and bubble wrap. I wasted a few minutes in my car looking at the engagement ring, admiring it on my hand, wishing that I could actually marry Jessie. But then I finally managed to put it in the box with the necklace. Almost as an afterthought, I slipped the Marquis de Sade's ring off my finger and tucked it in the box. Big diamonds and famous designers were one thing, but I was sure there were plenty of rich weirdos out there that would pay big money for the ring of a legendary pervert. Jessie had intended for me to use the ring as protection. And I was, to some extent. I just wasn't using it to protect myself.

It occurred to me that Viggo wouldn't know the history of the ring, so I wrote down what I could remember on the back of a receipt I found on the floor of my car and stuck it in the box. After I sealed everything in securely,

I headed over to the post office and sent the box general delivery as requested. The clerk thought I was nuts. He told me I should just hand deliver the thing myself, but I explained that I was on my way out of town and didn't have the time.

A block down from the post office was a mom-and-pop hardware store that had somehow managed to survive when almost everyone else had been run out of business by the big chain stores. I found some wooden dowel rods that I thought, if I put my knee into it, I would be able to snap in a way that would make sharp points.

"Need any help, young lady?" an elderly gentleman asked.

"Do you have any wooden tent stakes?" I gave him a hopeful look. Those would already have a point.

"Wooden tent stakes?" The old man frowned as he thought about it. "No, I'm sorry, miss. I think if you want wooden tent stakes you'd probably have to carve them yourself."

"That's okay," I said, grabbing a half dozen of the dowel rods. "I'll just take these." I thought of something else. "Do you carry crowbars and maybe some bolt cutters?"

With my errands done, I headed back to Tiburon, directing my car toward the public pier. I knew something special about a storm drain that was about twenty yards from the pier. It wasn't actually a storm drain, just a small tunnel mocked up to look like one. It was a secret entrance to the Vanderlind Castle. Viggo had helped Blossom and me use it to escape when we unwittingly crashed a vampire party. Blossom had been unconscious at the time, so it was very good the giant had been there. My best friend was not overweight by any means, but dragging her as dead weight was surprisingly challenging.

I parked the car and then just sat there for a while looking out at the river. I kept thinking about Fred. I knew without a doubt that I loved Jessie. I loved him with all of my heart. But I couldn't let Fred and the others die. If there was even the smallest chance that I could save them then I had to try.

Something kept nagging at my brain. When Grandpa Vanderlind made his big entrance during the Christmas Eve party, he appeared from somewhere off by the kitchen. That also happened to be the general location of where the steps were that led down to the dungeon. Adding that to Jessie's information plus the cryptic hints from Viggo, I had an idea where my classmates were possibly being held. Or at least where I should start looking. I was convinced that if Fred and the others were still alive, they were imprisoned somewhere that was accessible from the castle.

The idea of sneaking into a vampire fortress was pretty damn scary, even if I was dating one of the vampires. Still, I had to be brave and force myself to enter. The day was getting on, and I needed time to look for Fred and everyone while there was still plenty of sunlight.

Steeling my hand, I picked up my phone and hit Jessie's number. I'd already programmed it into my cell. I could barely hear the ringing over the pounding of my own heart. If things did not go well, there was a strong possibility that Jessie wouldn't get my message until after I was dead. The phone rang several times, and then went to voicemail. I wasn't expecting it, but Jessie had already recorded an outgoing message. He said, "Aurora, I know it must be you calling because you're the only one who has this number. Please be strong, darling, and know that I love you." Then there was a beep.

My thoughts had been racing before I dialed, scrambling to come up with just the right thing to say. But hearing Jessie's voice made my mind go blank. For a few moments, I couldn't even think of why I was calling. "Jessie," I finally blurted, my voice sounding dry. "Your grandfather grabbed Fred, and I think I know where he's keeping him. I know you might not understand this, but I can't let Fred die. He can't die because of me. Not because ..." I trailed off. "If I didn't ..." My voice was sounding very shaky. "If I didn't love you then ..." I knew I was making a mess of the message, but I couldn't think of a way to express what I was feeling. I couldn't say, "If I wasn't in love with a vampire then this never would have happened." I couldn't let those be the last words of mine that Jessie ever heard. I took a deep breath and finally managed to say, "Just know that I love you more than I ever thought it was possible to love. But this is something I have to do." My hands were shaking so badly that I found it hard to press the button to end the call.

I rifled around in the glove box and found a small flashlight. I should have bought a nice one while I was at the hardware store, but I didn't think of it. Then I turned my attention to the dowel rods. Breaking them over my knee turned out to be a little bit painful, so I used my boot instead. Some snapped cleanly, which was no use to me, but others splintered, leaving jagged ends. When I was finished, I had six good stakes. It seemed foolish packing a handful of flimsy dowel rods against a powerful vampire, but I wasn't going to enter the castle empty handed.

I stuffed a few stakes into the waist of my pants and put the others in my backpack. The bolt cutters fit snugly inside the bag, but the crowbar stuck out the top. That would probably seem a little suspicious if anyone happened to be looking, but there was nothing I could do, so I just said "the hell with it" and got out of the car. Fortunately, there wasn't anyone around the pier on a cold afternoon in December, so there wasn't anyone to witness a crazy girl with a crowbar climbing into a storm drain.

The drain was actually a set of bars with a latch on the inside. You had to know where to feel for the latch, but once you knew where it was, it became easy to undo it and swing the bars open like a gate. Unless it was the end of December and the bars were frozen to the ground, then you had to lie on your back and kick at them for a while to break them free of winter's grip before yanking the whole thing open.

Once inside, I carefully closed and latched the bars again. I didn't want any curious kids accidentally entering the vampires' castle. Tiburon had already suffered enough loss. I had to crawl for a few yards, the crowbar scraping on the ceiling, before the tunnel expanded and I was able to stand. The light from outside illuminated my way for a little while, but eventually I had to turn on the flashlight. The walls of the tunnel were made of the same gray stone that was used to construct the castle itself. There was a cold, moldy smell to the air, and the stones were glazed with frost. I wondered if the escape tunnel had existed when the building was in Budapest or if it was something that was added after the move to America.

The tunnel came to a dead end. From inside the castle, access to the tunnel was concealed, but from inside the tunnel, access to the castle was just yanking on a door handle that appeared to be randomly attached to the wall. The secret door popped open with a small groan. I struggled with it

for a few moments before I could push it wide enough to slip inside. I was very glad I had shut the faux storm drain's bars securely. I could easily see pulling on the handle if I was a kid seeking a bit of adventure and not realizing that some adventures shouldn't be real.



## **Chapter 30**

The secret door opened from under the steps that led to the castle from the dungeon. I stood very still, listening. I didn't know what the castle staff

did while the Vanderlinds were in their coffins. All was quiet, so I took a few steps forward and turned on my flashlight. I started casting the beam against the stone walls and the three cells of the dungeon. Unlike the stonework in the rest of the house, the walls of the dungeon were composed of jutting points and rough edges. After a few moments, I realized that the flashlight wasn't really necessary. The dungeon wasn't well lit, but there was enough illumination that I could see fairly well once my eyes had adjusted.

My legs felt shaky underneath me, but I forced myself to move forward. "Fred?" I called in a low voice. "Liz?" I took a few more steps forward. "Don? Mervin? Is anybody here?"

It was quite obvious that nobody was there. That would have been too easy just to saunter into the dungeon and find the missing kids. Plus Mervin, of course.

"Where the hell are they?" I grumbled to myself.

I briefly considered trying to stealthily search the castle. But I wasn't foolish enough to believe I was some sort of ninja who could slip from room to room without drawing the attention of the castle's staff. Plus, I was pretty sure Jessie or Viggo would have known if the prisoners were in the living area of the castle and would have somehow let me know.

All three cell doors were open, so I went and sat in the one furthest from the stairs and the secret passage. It was the cell where Jessie had locked Blossom and me for our own protection so we wouldn't fall victim to a lecherous vampire when the castle was celebrating Jessie's maker's day. We were so completely stupid for having snuck into the party.

But did I regret knowing Jessie? Being with Jessie? If Blossom and I hadn't crashed the party then he would always just have been that handsome boy I saw once at the library. But there was also a strong chance that Fred and the others wouldn't have been snatched off the street. I didn't know why Grandpa Vanderlind had grabbed Mervin, but I was convinced the teenagers had been taken because of me.

It really wasn't the right time to mentally beat myself up. I had to stay focused and figure out where everyone was being held prisoner. Freeing them would definitely alleviate the guilt I was feeling. I tried to think about

what Viggo had said. I was looking for something that wasn't as well hidden as I expected, and if I was in the dungeon, it was right under my nose.

I scanned the walls, the bars, and the floor of the cell. I figured maybe it was on the ground. Was that what he meant by under my nose? I got on my knees and rubbed my hands across the floor, pressing at the different stones in case one turned out to be the release button to another secret passage. I felt under the bunk and pulled at all the bars, crawling along with my nose an inch off the floor.

When the first cell proved fruitless, I inched out into the hall and made my way down to the second cell. Viggo had mentioned the dungeon but said nothing about having to be in a cell. Or did he? I strained to remember his exact wording.

The second cell gave me nothing but scratched and chafed palms from running my hands over the rough stones of the floor. I crawled down to the third cell and gave it a thorough search only to find nothing. No hint. No clue. Nothing. I got to my feet and stretched my back. It was starting to throb. I sat on the bunk and propped my head up with my fists. What the hell was under my nose?

I felt a little nauseated, probably brought on by stress. There was also a definite smell coming from the third cell, which wasn't helping matters. I wondered how long a bad stench could last. Was I smelling the misery of medieval prisoners who probably weren't very hygienic before they were tossed in the dungeon? But it didn't smell like feces or body odor or anything like that. It smelled like old, boggy water, like someone hadn't bothered to clean a fish tank for a very long time.

I got to my feet and started pacing around the cell. Was that what Viggo meant about something being hidden under my nose? Did he mean to follow my nose or did he mean something directly below my nose? I stared at the stones beneath my feet. Or did he mean both?

The cell wasn't very big, but the smell was definitely stronger at the end that was closest to the stairs and the tunnel. Had I noticed it when I came in? I couldn't remember. I started sniffing along the wall. The boggy stench was definitely strongest in the corner of the cell that was under the bunk. If

I was lying on the bunk, that would be right under my nose. Was that what Viggo had said? Did he say sitting on a bunk or lying on a bunk? As quietly as I could, I moved the rusty metal bunk to one side. It made a sharp screeching sound as I didn't lift it high enough and one of the legs scraped across the stone floor.

The smell was really, really strong in that corner. If my body wasn't pumping adrenaline like crazy, I was sure I probably would have been gagging. I began poking around at the stones. They were slightly moss covered, which was different than any place else in the dungeon. I thought that one stone in the very corner about the size of my two fists had maybe moved slightly when I pressed on it. To get the secret passage under the stairs to open, I had to press very hard on a stone that was a slightly different color from the rest. I put my palm against this new stone and pressed with all my might. Nothing happened. Maybe I had just imagined that the stone had moved. I prodded at it with my fingers a bit. I could definitely get it to move from side to side, but not in. Maybe it came out, instead. Grabbing at the stone with my fingertips, I tried pulling. It moved a little, but then my hands slipped off. I repositioned myself and pulled again, the sharp little edges of the rock biting at my flesh and tearing at my nails. I didn't let go, though. I didn't stop. Inch by inch, I was able to claw the stone out of the wall.

The filthy fish-tank smell grew much stronger. Using the flashlight, I peered into the dark hole I had just created. There was something inside. I couldn't tell what it was because it had green slime all over it. It was moss or algae or something. I tried scraping it away with my boot, but couldn't get the right angle. "Fine," I grumbled to myself. I fished a mitten out of my pocket and put it on. Better to ruin a mitten than my hand, in case the slime was really something gross. Cringing a little, I reached in and felt the object. It appeared to be an iron bar.

Tentatively, I pushed at the bar, thinking maybe it was some kind of lever. It did nothing. I pushed again much harder but still had no luck. Wrapping my hand around it, I tugged at the bar. I thought there was a little play, but maybe that was just my imagination. Grasping the bar firmly, I yanked at it. It moved a little, and I definitely heard a click. That was all the encouragement I needed. I grabbed the bar and heaved backward, putting all of my weight into it.

I hung there for a moment, then the bar released, coming forward toward me, moving almost like a stick shift in a car. It happened so suddenly, I lost my footing and landed hard on my butt. There was a low rumbling sound. I expected to see something, like part of the wall giving way to a secret passage or something, but there was nothing.

I got to my feet, shedding the slimy mitten. I didn't know what else to do with it, so I turned it inside out and shoved it back in my pocket. Brushing the seat of my pants, I looked around. The cell looked exactly the same. I had no idea what I had just activated by pulling the lever.

Rubbing at my nose, I noticed the dirty fish tank stench was even worse. And there seemed to be a small breeze blowing through the dungeon. Stepping out of the cell, I looked around. There was a dark, jagged line in the wall very close to the original secret passage that led to the tunnel. It was immediately obvious that the stench was coming in from there. I hurried over and pushed at the crack. It was a stone door that blended seamlessly with the wall. This was the hidden passage that Viggo considered easy to find? I had to wonder what the giant would think was a challenge to find. But at least his cryptic hints had encouraged me to keep looking.

I shined my flashlight through the door and saw that it led to another tunnel, but it was on a lower level. To access it, I would have to climb down some metal rungs that were fastened to the wall. "Great," I grumbled. Gripping the flashlight between my teeth, I shimmied through the door and began to descend.

Once I reached the bottom, I looked around, using the beam of the flashlight to cut through the darkness. It was a fairly wide tunnel, and I was able to stand up with room to spare. It wasn't the same construction as the castle and the other secret passage. If I'd had to guess, I would have said it was an unused pipe in the Tiburon sewer system. I took a step forward and immediately plunged my boot into some rather murky water. I cringed for a moment but then realized that the water was green with algae. This probably wasn't a tunnel used to transport human waste. It was an access tunnel or maybe something for fresh water. I was no city planner. I really had no idea. I was just grateful that I wasn't dealing with poop.

The tunnel stretched into scary blackness in both directions. My flashlight wasn't powerful enough to show me more than a few feet either way, and what it did reveal was just more tunnel. I wasn't sure which way to head. I could hear a distant hammering coming from the left, so I decided to move in that direction. That way showed a slight incline, and I was pretty sure it was the way back toward town. Maybe the banging was a construction crew or something. Both directions felt very intimidating, but I somehow felt safer moving toward the noise.

My progress wasn't super fast because I kept thinking someone was coming up behind me. When the urge to look got too strong, I would wave the flashlight around wildly, trying to see if anyone was there. After what must have been a minute of creeping forward, but felt like much longer, I noticed daylight shining in from a gap in the upper left corner of the tunnel. As I got closer, I turned off my flashlight to spare the battery. The gap was about twenty feet over my head. Like where the roads drain into the sewer after it rains only much deeper. I must have been in the Tiburon drainage sewers.

As I kept moving forward, the hammering got a little louder. There was another gap in the sewer revealing a sliver of sunlight. The gap looked a little closer than the last one, but I was walking up an incline, so that wasn't completely unexpected. I wondered if at some point the tunnel would simply lead to the surface. Or at least into town where I could crawl out a manhole or something. The sunlight gave me comfort. I assumed Grandpa Vanderlind wouldn't venture down the tunnel until after dark. But I also began to wonder if I had chosen the wrong direction. Wouldn't a vampire store his food supply in a deep dark place? Would it be better if I turned around while there was still time? Were Fred and the others even in the sewer?

The sound of the hammer broke off abruptly. I thought I heard the faint sounds of a brief conversation. I wondered if it was about me. I aimed my flashlight toward the ground to dim its beam then pressed it against my leg to dim it even more. Then I switched it off. I waited for the hammering to continue. It did not. The only hammer I could hear was my heart pounding loudly in my chest.

Trying to control my breath so I wouldn't panic, I moved forward again as quietly as possible. I felt like I was getting very close to the source of the hammering. I heard some movement, a rustling around. A male voice hissed, "It's him. Get ready."

"Fred?" I whispered, taking a few more tentative steps forward. "Don?"

"Get away from us, you psycho!" someone shouted, and I felt something hard mashing into my shoulder sending a sharp pain shooting through my arm.

I shrieked, raising my arms to deflect another blow. "Yieeh!" I cried as someone else grabbed my ankles and jerked, sending me crashing backward to the ground. I felt one of the stakes I had tucked in the waist of my pants snap, gouging at my legs.

Fortunately I was able to keep hold of my flashlight. I fumbled for the button and turned it on. "Fred?" I cried, my shoulder throbbing and my butt numb with pain. "Is that you?"

"Aurora?" was the hoarse reply.

I directed the flashlight toward the sound of his voice and saw two pale, frightened faces looking at me from behind a set of bars. "Don?" I asked, assuming he was the one who had tripped me.

"Oh, my God. Aurora," Fred gasped. "What are you doing here?" He stretched his arms through the bars of his prison reaching for me, trying to help me up.

"Looking for you," I said, getting to my feet by myself. His arms weren't nearly long enough.

"You came down into a sewer to look for us?" Don asked, sounding a bit incredulous.

"Kind of," I told him, rubbing my shoulder. "It's a long story. I'll tell you about it later. What the hell did you hit me with?"

"Sorry," Fred said. "It's a piece of concrete that I managed to break off the wall. We've been trying to chip our way out of here. I thought you were the dude that grabbed us. He's totally twisted and like psycho strong."

“I believe you,” I assured him. “Are Liz and Mervin with you?” I directed the beam of my flashlight to the interior of the cell. I saw one small figure huddled on the floor, but that was it.

“Liz is here, but she’s not doing great. None of us have seen Mervin. We don’t know what happened to him,” Don told me.

“Oh,” I said, upset but trying not to overreact. I didn’t want to let on that Tiburon’s only taxi driver was probably in a shallow grave somewhere, drained of all his blood.

The pain in my shoulder lessened a little, and I was able to think a little straighter. “What’s wrong with Liz?”

“It’s that psycho,” Fred told me. “He thinks he’s a vampire or something. He keeps drugging us and draining our blood. I think he drinks it.”

“Oh,” I said, trying to sound like this was new information. “That is pretty sick.”

“He’s almost drained Liz,” Don added. “I don’t think she’s going to last much longer.”

“Okay,” I said, putting my bag on the ground. “Then let’s get you the hell out of there.” I unzipped the backpack. “I brought a crowbar and some bolt cutters. Unless you happen to know where the psycho keeps the keys.”

“Aurora,” Fred said, his voice sounding sharp and frightened.

“What?” I asked, looking up, confused by his tone.

“The psycho keeps the keys in his pocket,” a deep male voice snarled from somewhere behind me in the dark.







## Chapter 31

I thrust my arm in my bag, hoping to grab one of the makeshift stakes, but I wasn't nearly fast enough. Jessie's grandfather snatched me up by the collar of my coat, my feet dangling off the ground, and gave me a good shake. He kicked my backpack to one side. "I see my grandson's little friend has decided to pay a social call," the vampire said with an amused sneer.

"Leave her alone," Fred shouted, striking at the vampire with his rock.

In only an instant, Grandpa Vanderlind dropped me and grabbed Fred's arm. He began twisting it, causing the boy to let out a sharp howl of pain, the concrete chunk slipping from his fingers. "I thought I told you," the old man snarled, "I don't like back talk from my food."

"Stop it," I said, jumping to my feet. The vampire smacked me back down to the ground. "Stop it!" I shouted. "I've come to make a deal with you."

My words penetrated the killer's brain, and he released Fred. Thankfully, Don was there to immediately catch him and pull Fred away from the bars. "What was that?" the vampire asked, turning to face me fully.

"I came here to offer you a deal," I said, getting to my feet.

"What makes you think you're in any position to make a deal with me?" the senior Vanderlind asked. I'd lost my grip on the flashlight when I scrambled for the stakes in my bag. It had somehow landed tilted at an upward angle, so its beam cut a diagonal line of light across the tunnel allowing me to see a portion of the vampire's face. His skin looked like wax that had melted and then hardened again in uneven dollops and blobs.

"I know you promised Jessie that if he gave me up, you wouldn't hurt me," I said, getting to my feet even though my legs were shaking. "But I'm here to make you a counter offer." My stomach quaked, and I steeled myself for what I had to say. "I will give myself to you as a companion or for one night of feasting or however you see fit to end my life. I will even write a note to Jessie explaining that I willingly made this agreement."

“In exchange for these mortals, I suppose,” Grandpa Vanderlind said, jerking his head in the direction of the iron bars.

“Yes, I want you to let them go,” I told him. “But that’s not all.”

The vampire released a small, incredulous laugh. “You want more than that?”

“Yes,” I said, trying to keep my voice from shaking. “I want you to stop hunting anywhere near Tiburon.” I knew it was ridiculous to ask him to stop hunting in general, but I hoped to at least keep my town safe. “And I’d like to send my mom a note or something so she doesn’t have to spend the rest of her life wondering what happened to me.” At the mention of my mom, my voice wavered a little, but I managed to hold back my tears. I knew my death would devastate my mother, but at least she wouldn’t suffer the way Grandma Gibson had by spending the rest of her life wondering.

“Aurora, don’t do this,” Fred said from where he was crumpled on the ground cradling his arm. “If you found us, then the police can find us, too, and send this nut job to jail.”

“It’s not like that,” I said to him, amazed at his valor even when it might mean the loss of his own life. He really was the stuff of heroes. I hoped that he and Blossom would find each other after I was gone. “I wish I could explain, but you’re going to have to trust me that this is the only way.”

Grandpa Vanderlind was rubbing his chin, thinking over my offer. “I have to admit,” he said, “I have rather been wondering what you taste like. Your demands are impertinent for a mortal, but not outrageous.” He nodded his head decisively. “I agree.” With that, he pulled a large key out of his pocket, stuck it in the lock, and gave it a twist. The cell door swung open. “Listen up, children,” he said, like an old-fashioned schoolmaster addressing an unruly class. “You are free to go.”

“I don’t think Liz can walk,” Don said, helping the struggling Fred to his feet. “We’ll have to carry her out.”

Fred shook his head, obviously in a lot of pain. “I don’t think I can lift her.”

“I’ll help you,” I told them, stepping forward.

“Don’t think I’m that foolish,” the vampire growled.

“You have my word,” I told him. “I’ll just help them out of the tunnel. That’s all.”

“Do you really think I would take the word of a mortal?” Grandpa Vanderlind asked as if I was being completely irrational even though we had just agreed that I would sacrifice myself for my friends.

I shot him a flat look. “You could help carry her if you’re concerned about me trying to escape,” I pointed out.

“Fine,” Grandpa Vanderlind said impatiently. “You may carry her.”

I hurried into the cell and scooped up Liz’s legs as Don lifted her by her armpits. Her head lolled back and forth, her eyes cracking open. “Aurora,” she said. “He got you, too?”

“Everything’s going to be okay,” I told her. “You’re going home now. It’s all over, and you’re going to be fine.”

Don turned to look at the vampire as we bundled Liz out of the cell. “How do we get out of here?”

“Just go up that way and climb out one of the drains,” the vampire said, impatiently flapping his hand in the direction that was away from the castle.

The four of us started heading the way he indicated. “Just remember,” the vampire said, jerking at my shoulder. “If you even think of trying to run, I will suck dry every person on this planet that you’ve ever met. And the first one will be your mother.”

“Grandfather.” I heard Jessie’s voice shout from some distance down the tunnel, back toward the castle. My heart leapt into my mouth.

“What are you doing down here?” the elder vampire demanded. “How did you even find this place?”

“I looked under the nose,” Jessie said, striding toward us rapidly. “Daniel and I found it when we were kids playing in the dungeon back in Budapest. It’s really not that well concealed.”

“Under the nose?” I couldn’t help but ask. Even through my terror and heartbreak, I still wanted to know what he was talking about. “There’s a nose in the dungeon?”

“Yes,” the old man replied impatiently. “The release button is under a rock that looks like a nose. You gained access through the emergency release. And thanks for that, by the way. I’m going to have to hire a paver to get that stone back in there again.”

“You’re welcome,” I mumbled. *So there had been an easy access to the tunnel*, thought a portion of my brain that had somehow distanced itself from the horror and was just watching like an impersonal observer.

Jessie got right up in his grandfather’s face. “What is Aurora doing down here?” he asked. “We had a deal.”

“That’s true,” Mr. Vanderlind agreed. “But then your sweetheart made her own deal.”

“No,” Fred grunted. He was leaning against the bars on the outside of the cage. “It’s a bad deal.”

“Aurora?” Jessie flashed me an alarmed look. “What did you agree to?”

I set Liz down. I couldn’t keep supporting her weight while we were just standing there. Looking at the floor, I said in a very small voice, “I traded my life for theirs.”

“No!” Jessie shouted.

“Too late,” his grandfather cackled. “We’ve already made the agreement. She came to me of her own accord. I used no influence on her.”

“Aurora,” Jessie gasped. “What have you done?”

“Don’t you see?” I asked, losing the battle to keep my tears in check. I knew I had to go through with it, but Jessie being there made it a million times harder. “I couldn’t have them die because of me. This is my fault. He’s grabbing teenagers because of me.”

“Actually, it’s not your fault,” Mr. Vanderlind assured me. “I simply enjoy the taste of young blood. I had something completely different planned for you.”

“You can’t do this, Grandfather,” Jessie said. “I want you to know that if you kill her then that is the same as killing me.”

Mr. Vanderlind laughed. “Do you think after decades in a wrecked boat floating around the Atlantic and baking in the sun, I didn’t plan your death a thousand times?”

“He would have found a way to kill me anyway,” I told Jessie. “At least this way, my friends get to live.”

“She’s right, you know,” the grandfather admitted. He was obviously feeling cavalier. “She’s much more perceptive than I gave her credit for.” He turned to address me. “I can see why my grandson was so taken with you. You really are quite a charming creature. I will keep my promises to you.” He tried to suppress a small chuckle before adding, “Some of them, at least.”

I felt my stomach drop. “Which ones were you planning not to keep?” I managed to ask between trembling lips. I wondered if my mom would be safe or if I needed to warn her to move far away from Tiburon in my farewell note.

He smiled at me, one of his fangs glinting in the beam of the flashlight. “I guess you’ll never know.”

“You bastard!” Jessie shouted, lunging for his grandfather.

“Stop right there,” the elder vampire demanded. “I am your maker. You will not lay a hand on me. I command you.”

## **Chapter 32**

Jessie froze as if he'd instantly been turned to a pillar of stone. His grandfather smiled. "That's better. I won't tolerate any nonsense from you. Do we understand each other?"

Although Jessie's face stayed distorted with rage, his hands dropped to his sides. The words "Yes, Grandfather," were torn from his lips.



“You need to stop all this nonsense over a mere mortal right now,” Mr. Vanderlind said, sounding more like a fussy old Englishman than a ferocious member of the undead.

“Yes, Grandfather,” Jessie repeated, even though he shot me an expression of sheer torture.

“Your little mortal and I have made an agreement,” the elder Vanderlind continued in a voice that sounded like he was reasoning with a small child. “And we are going to keep it. Now,” he said, snapping his fingers and pointing at Liz on the ground. “I’m famished, so pick up this girl. Let’s get these children out of here so I can eat.”

“Yes, Grandfather,” Jessie said for the third time, although choking on the words like sawdust in his mouth. He obediently bent and scooped up Liz.

“All right. Everyone move along,” Grandpa Vanderlind said, herding us up the tunnel. When I stooped to pick up my backpack, he barked, “Leave it!”

Don bent over and snagged the flashlight. He kept the beam pointed a few yards ahead of Jessie’s feet, not realizing that vampires could see in the dark. Or maybe he just didn’t understand that Jessie was a vampire.

“Why did you do this?” Jessie asked me in a low voice as we walked along.

“How could I not?” was all I could think of to say in reply. I had a question of my own for him. “Did you know the kids were locked down here? Did you know this whole time?”

He shook his head. “I checked after Colette’s funeral. It was empty. I only thought to look now because ...” his voice trailed off. Glancing in his grandfather’s direction, he tried again. “Because a friend told me that you were good at solving puzzles.”

I imagined that Viggo must have roused Jessie from his coffin. I was very glad I had sent the giant my jewelry. I hoped he and Gloria would be able to get away.

We walked for a dozen yards in silence. Fred was in front of us cradling his arm. Don was off to his right but a little behind, trying to aid Jessie with

the flashlight. I was to Jessie's left, closest to the patches of sunlight that flashed past from the drains, and Mr. Vanderlind trailed behind his grandson by several yards.

I felt sick to my stomach. I knew I'd made the deal, but I didn't want to die. I didn't want to just hand myself over to quench the thirst of a crazed vampire. Unfortunately, I couldn't think of how to escape. I needed a plan and just plain couldn't think of one. I had to get Fred and Don and Liz clear first. I knew that part. Once they were safe then I would have to try something. I glanced in Jessie's direction. I wondered if there was any possible way he could help me. I knew he would try if there was an opportunity, but his grandfather's control over him seemed to be ridiculously strong.

"Those are nice earrings," Jessie said in a casual voice, interrupting my thoughts. My hand flew to my right ear. I had forgotten I'd put the silver earrings on. Jessie continued with, "Do you have anything else like that?"

"Uh ..." I mumbled, processing what he was asking me. He wanted to know if I was carrying any other weapons. I thought about the makeshift stakes that were still scratching at my back. "Yes," I told him, trying to keep my voice neutral. "You know how I like to keep things under my belt."

He gave a small nod. "I love a woman who knows how to accessorize," he said, keeping his voice low.

As we made our way up the shallow incline, the storm drains got closer and closer together, allowing more light to filter in. Jessie pressed against the wall and hurried through the light created by each drain. I could hear him inhale sharply whenever he was even in the proximity of direct sunlight. I took off my coat and draped it over his head to give him more protection. His hands were mostly shielded by Liz's body.

Mr. Vanderlind, on the other hand, simply walked through the light. His skin smoked a little, but he quickly healed after he returned to the shadows. "You'll have to learn to toughen up," he said, ripping my coat away from his progeny and flinging it on the ground. "A few years at sea should do the trick." I shivered, wondering what future the senior Vanderlind had planned for his grandson.

We were getting pretty close to the surface. The sewer drains were only about six feet above our heads. It was still fairly dark in the tunnel, but the light from outside was much stronger. I could tell Jessie was really suffering, but he didn't make any more sounds of discomfort.

"Everyone hold up," Mr. Vanderlind commanded. He walked over to some rungs sticking out of the wall and looked up. "I want to be done with this little drama. You children can go up here."

Don and Fred stopped. Don directed the beam of the flashlight toward the ceiling revealing a manhole cover. I couldn't tell where we were in relationship to downtown Tiburon, but I assumed we were getting closer.

"I don't think Fred can climb up there with his arm," Jessie said.

Fred was a very athletic person, so I thought he probably could even with a broken arm, but I assumed Jessie had his reasons for saying that he couldn't. I quickly slipped over to stand at Fred's side. Wrapping my arm around him, I said, "You can climb up there, can't you, Fred?" while simultaneously tracing the word "no" on his back where no one else could see.

Fred gave me a quick, penetrating glance, then squinted up at the manhole. "I'm in so much pain, I'm about to pass out," he said. "I can barely walk. There's no way I can climb up there."

"Well then, Jessie will lift you up and shove you through," Grandpa Vanderlind growled.

"Grandfather, you've already put these children through so much. We are so close to the end. Why don't we just let them out there?" Jessie asked.

"Because it's three in the afternoon," was the elder vampire's reply. "Are you really that eager to gaze upon sunlight?"

Jessie shrugged. "I can take it if you can."

The old vampire glared at his grandson. He had been challenged. It was a foolish challenge, but most challenges that men make are pretty foolish. "Fine," he snapped. "Then you can open the door for them if you're so eager to step out from the shadows."

That didn't sound good. I wanted to live, but I didn't want to get Jessie killed in the process. I stepped forward to face Mr. Vanderlind. "I can open whatever door you need opened," I volunteered.

"That won't be necessary." The elder vampire rubbed his chin, looking me over. "You really are a remarkably brave young woman. Is this a modern thing? Are all young ladies these days like you?"

I could see Jessie out of the corner of my eye whispering something to Fred. "Yes," I said, a bit louder than the occasion called for, my voice echoing slightly in the tunnel. I needed to keep talking. I needed to create some sound cover for Jessie. "Women aren't fainting and waiting for men to save them anymore. We know how to fight. We know how to take care of ourselves."

The vampire chuckled. "I'm glad to hear it. That will make hunting so much more fun." He turned to the rest of the group. "Let's go. I should be resting in my coffin not herding about a bunch of teenagers."

As we continued walking, Fred came to keep pace at my side. I wondered what Jessie had said to him but didn't dare ask. The tunnel got very dark again, and there was a sudden steep rise that didn't make sense to me. At that point, I thought we'd have been at surface level. Don directed the flashlight in front of us, and we appeared to be coming up on a wall. But it wasn't made of cement. The wall was made out of wood.

"This is it," the elder Vanderlind said. "Jessie, get the door."

Jessie obeyed, gently setting Liz on the ground. "Don," he called. "Please come hold her head."

As Don crouched to comply and Jessie walked over to the wooden wall, Mr. Vanderlind said, "Hold on a minute. I've just thought of something." He snatched the flashlight out of Don's hands then pointed at Fred. "You. Go stand with your friends." When I made a move to join the other mortals, he told me. "No. You stay back. I want you to remember everything."

Mr. Vanderlind held the flashlight up to his face so that Fred and Don could see his eyes. "Wake her up," he said, pointing at Liz. "Slap her in the face if you have to."

Fred and Don were more gentle than the vampire would have liked, but they managed to roust Liz to at least some level of consciousness.

The senior Vanderlind's eyes began to glow like hot coals. His voice became soft and coaxing like a pervert offering candy to a child. I knew what he was doing. He was using his influence over my friends. I turned my head away and shut my eyes as he said, "As soon as you leave here, your memories will start to fade. You'll know that something unpleasant has happened, but you won't quite be able to remember what. By the time you reach help, it will all be so very cloudy, like a bad dream after you wake up and get out of bed. You'll know you were frightened, but you won't quite remember why."

"The police will want to know something," Jessie informed him. "You have to give them some type of excuse."

"Fine," Grandpa Vanderlind said, sounding very put upon. "You were kidnapped and blindfolded. You don't remember anything about your captors beyond that they were men. They didn't abuse you in any way, and then you woke up one morning and they were gone."

"But what about Fred's arm? What about Liz?" I demanded, my eyes still closed. "They can't say they weren't abused when they obviously have injuries."

"Just say you can't remember," the vampire snapped. "People will ask you questions about what happened, but you can't remember."

"When it comes to a story, you're really quite the craftsman," Jessie said in a dry tone.

"Enough of this nonsense," Grandpa Vanderlind snapped, his temper rising. "I'm not here to coddle mortals. Just open the damn door and let's get them the hell out of here."

I cracked open my eyes as I heard Jessie moving toward the door. Fred and Don were rubbing at their eyes as if they'd just woken out of a sound sleep. Liz was very still. She looked dazed, and I wondered how long she had left if we didn't get her to a hospital soon.

There was some clanging as if Jessie was trying to get some machinery to move that hadn't moved in a long time. "Do you know what you're

doing?" his grandfather snarled.

"No," Jessie snarled right back. "I've never done this before. Would you like to come over here and help?"

Mr. Vanderlind did the opposite of stepping forward to help. He actually retreated a few yards back down the tunnel. "Just figure it out."

After a bit more struggle, Jessie began turning something that made a steady clicking noise. The wooden wall seemed to quiver for a moment, then something broke loose and it began to move, rising and folding like a garage door. Sunlight began streaming in.

"Jessie," I exclaimed, dashing forward. "Get back. I'll open the damn door," I said, shoving him away from the light. He stepped back to stay out of the full glare of the sunlight but stayed as close to me as he possibly could.

I looked down and could make out a small metal crank with a wooden handle. I grabbed it and tried to give it a turn. It was much more challenging than I had anticipated. Jessie had appeared to be doing it with very little effort, but I had to brace my feet and really put my body into it. The door rose an inch and then another, the light from the afternoon sun pushing the vampires back a half step at a time. I built up a bit of speed at the crank, and the door rose higher and higher.

Don went to get to his feet, but Jessie yelled at him to "Stay with Liz," causing the boy to sink down to the ground again. Fred came up by my side and stood very close to me even as the light pushed Jessie further away.

"Are they really vampires?" Fred asked.

I nodded, staying focused on the crank.

"So you could walk out into the sunlight and there's nothing they could do to stop you?"

"It will be dark again in a few hours, and then there would be hell to pay," I told him, breathing a little heavy from my efforts.

"Isn't it better to take your chances than to just hand yourself over?" he wanted to know.

“I wouldn’t just be risking me,” I informed him. “I’d be risking the lives of everyone in Tiburon. I’d be risking my mom. I’d be risking your parents. Everyone.” I finished hoisting up the door and locked the crank in place so it wouldn’t come crashing down again.

Jessie stood on the very edge of the sunlight. I could tell that even the indirect sun was causing him pain, but he still stood there. “Go with him,” Jessie said. “Go now.”

“No,” I said, whirling around to run back into the tunnel.

Fred caught me by the wrist with his good hand. “Aurora, this is our only chance. We have to go now.”

I couldn’t break free. Fred’s grip was like iron. “Stop it!” I shouted at him. “Let me go!”

“No!” Fred shouted back.

“Go,” Jessie said to me imploringly. “Just go with him.”

“Fuck this,” Don said, getting to his feet. “You do whatever the hell you want. I’m out of here.”

“Stay there!” Jessie shouted at him in such a commanding voice that Don became instantly rooted to the spot. Whipping his head around, Jessie said, “Aurora, you must leave. Go!”

“No,” I said, thrashing against Fred’s grip. “You know what will happen if I do. You know I can’t.”

“Oh, for pity sake,” Mr. Vanderlind snarled as he stormed forward. “Get out of the way,” he said, shoving Jessie aside so that he could stand the closest he possibly could to me without stepping into the sunlight. “Boy!” he called to Fred, his eyes starting to glow like two embers. “Listen to me.”

That’s when Jessie snatched up Don and physically hurled the teen with all his might at his grandfather.

## Chapter 33

Mr. Vanderlind went sprawling into the sunlight as Don crashed into him. The vampire let out a scream of pain and rage, his body instantly beginning to smoke as soon as the light touched his skin.

Don immediately rolled off of the man, surprised and disoriented. But Fred was right there. He abruptly released my hand and dove on top of the vampire, tackling him as he tried to stagger to his feet.

The senior Vanderlind wasn't going down without a fight. He hadn't survived in the middle of the ocean for eight decades without being tough. He flung Fred off with a swing of his arm and sent the boy smashing into the trunk of a nearby tree. There was a loud crack. Fred let out a shriek of pain and slumped to the ground.

"Aurora, silver!" Jessie shouted.

Yanking an earring out of my ear, I dove on top of the vampire, slapping the silver mesh against his face. I was aiming for his eye, but only got his cheek. The vampire shrieked and thrashed violently. I felt a sharp blow to the side of my head, knocking me to the ground. Everything went fuzzy then dark for a moment. When I was able to see again, the vampire was towering over me.

"Aurora!" Jessie shouted, trying to rush out into the sunlight.

"Stay there!" his grandfather commanded, pointing at him with the full expectation that his orders would be obeyed. "I will deal with you later."



Jessie desperately wanted to disobey his grandfather, I could see that written across his face, but he couldn't. He had to do as his maker decreed.

I started crab walking backward on my hands and feet, my butt dragging on the ground, trying to put a little space between me and the member of the undead who was now looking at me with the crazed eyes of a rabid dog. I scrabbled at my sweater, trying to free a piece of one of the shattered stakes that were slicing into my skin.

"I am going to drain you now, you little slut," the elder Vanderlind said, grabbing me by the hair and dragging me back to the shade of the tunnel. "I am going to suck out every ounce of your blood and then spend the next hundred years teaching my grandson a lesson about loyalty," he told me as he flung me to the floor.

"No," I whimpered, giving up on the stakes. I'd landed on the wood too many times. They were nothing but splinters.

"Leave her alone!" Jessie bellowed, straining against his own body to come to my aid.

I tried to get to my feet. I tried to run. But Mr. Vanderlind shoved me back down, pinning my shoulders to the ground. "You should be happy," he told me. His skin had stopped smoking; it was starting to heal. His fangs glinted in the shadows. "You're about to experience a true vampire kiss." As he bent his head to drain me, I could see his eyes. They were gray like the ocean after a storm. They were Jessie's eyes.

"No," I shrieked, thrashing beneath him, flinging my head from side to side trying to avoid having his fangs pierce my flesh.

The vampire let out a hiss of pain and jerked away from me. I had been writhing so violently that my remaining silver earring had grazed his face. "You bitch," he snarled, raising his hand to strike me.

That's when Fred came up behind him and smashed him upside the head with a broken tree branch, doing his best imitation of a pro ballplayer swinging for the fences. Grandpa Vanderlind was caught so unaware that he partially slid off of me, freeing my left hand. I ripped the remaining earring out of my lobe and aimed it for his eye. This time I didn't miss. The vampire fell backward, shrieking and clawing at his face.

“Stake him!” Jessie yelled. “Stake him, now!”

Fred stood frozen for a moment, unsure what he should do. “You want me to ... what?” he stammered.

I leapt to my feet. “Give me the damn stake,” I shouted, grabbing the broken branch and yanking it out of his hands. I raised it high in the air and then, without hesitation, drove it down with all my might straight into the vampire’s chest.

“No!” the vampire screamed, a spray of blood spurting from his lips. “I can’t have lived this long to die by the likes of you.”

But it was already too late. His body started to shake and twitch as soon as the wood pierced his flesh. His skin split and cracked and peeled away from his bones. His eyes, so much like the beautiful gray eyes of the man I loved, shriveled in his skull. A blanket of black gas escaped his mouth, filling the air and making me cough and gag. I ran for fresh air with Fred hard on my heels.

I don’t know if it was the black gas or just the horror of having staked my second vampire in the space of a few months, but whatever was in my stomach came out in a hurry. I found myself retching against the tree that had so helpfully provided us with a branch to conquer our enemy. I felt profoundly grateful to the tree and knew that kneeling on the ground and puking on its roots was not the proper way to show my appreciation.

Once I had stopped heaving, Fred came over and slumped to the ground next to me. “I think I need to go to the hospital very soon,” he said in a voice that had a disturbing wheeze to it. He closed his eyes. “I’m worried that Liz might be dead, and I can’t find Don.”

I lifted my head. “Don?” I called. “Don!” I called louder.

I held very still, listening for the reply. That’s when I heard the sirens. I whipped my head around to look at Jessie. He was standing over a pile of rags that used to be his grandfather. “Can you bring Liz out here?” I called to him, finding it hard to get to my feet without the world spinning. “I think those sirens are for us.”

Jessie immediately grabbed Liz’s limp body and carried her over to the edge of the shadow. I heard him take a few deep breaths; then he rushed

forward. His skin immediately started to smoke. I could see layer upon layer burning away.

“Throw her!” I shouted. “Just throw her away from the door.

Jessie flung the girl’s limp body over the threshold of the door and then scrambled back inside. His face looked like he had been in a fire. The sirens were getting closer. “I’ll come to you tonight,” he called, smoke still radiating off his body. But he was already starting to heal. He must have hit an emergency release bar on the garage door because it abruptly slammed shut. We were left staring at a perfectly normal-looking garage door in somebody’s backyard.

The sirens were only a block or two away. “Let’s move Liz away from the garage,” I said, limping over to her body.

“I don’t think I can,” was Fred’s faint reply.

Fred was not looking good. I hoped he only had a few broken bones, but I shouldn’t have wanted him to try to move Liz. I felt like a jerk for even asking. Unfortunately, there was one more favor I felt compelled to bring up. “Fred, I know it’s a lot to ask, but is there any way you can avoid telling the police about the vampire?”

“The what?” he said, giving me a funny look.

A police car squealed into the driveway. “The vampires. Please don’t mention the vampires,” I said hurriedly.

“I’m sorry,” Fred replied. “I’m not feeling great. What are you asking?”

“Nothing,” I told him as two officers jumped out of the squad car, guns drawn. “It was nothing. I just wanted to thank you for my beautiful earrings.”

“You’re welcome,” he said with a faint smile. “I’m glad you like them.”

## Chapter 34

A few hours later, I was released from the hospital. I had some pretty bad bruises and they wanted me to take it easy for a few days, but I apparently didn't have a concussion and nothing was broken. Fred's shoulder was a mess. He also had some broken ribs and a punctured lung. The doctors were amazed by how well he was functioning given the state of his injuries. I knew it was mostly adrenaline from fighting the vampire, but I wasn't going to tell anyone else that. Don was fine, just a little low on blood. He had run to a neighbor's house and pounded on the door, telling them to call 911. Liz was in a coma, but they were transfusing her some blood and thought she would make it.

Once I was patched up, the police wanted to talk to me. I took my cue from Fred's behavior as the emergency vehicles had arrived. All knowledge of what had happened to him seemed to quickly melt away. He was in pain but not all that upset. Just happy to see the paramedics.

My mom was almost instantly at the hospital. I could imagine her running red lights and breaking speed limits. She insisted on being in the room with me when I was questioned by the police. They tried to bar her, but she was so ferociously adamant that they decided it was easier just to let her be there.

I couldn't tell them much. I said that I'd gone to the public pier. I had, after all, left my bug there. I told them I'd gotten out of my car and was headed along the shore when I heard footsteps coming up fast behind me. I turned to see who it was and then ... I let my eyes grow vague. They peppered me with questions, but I wore a puzzled expression and said things like "I'm not sure."

They did also ask me if I was fighting with my boyfriend. Had I heard from my father lately? Was anyone bullying me at school? Those answers I gave clearly, all to the negative. The two police officers questioning me, both women, had a quiet conversation between themselves. They agreed that they had to wait for the blood work to come back from the lab to see if I'd somehow been drugged.

The one question they asked me that I stumbled over answering was, "Why did you go to the pier?"

I really didn't have a good reply. "Uh ..." I said, completely caught out. Then I just shrugged my shoulders and added, "I like the pier." But I'm not sure they believed me. At least to my own ears, I sounded insincere.

As mom drove me home, I began to worry about things. Would anyone in the neighboring town remember me from the bank or the hardware store? There was the package I'd shipped general delivery. Would that be remembered and somehow traced to Viggo?

There was also my backpack still in the tunnel. It had my cell phone and keys and wallet. I hoped Jessie would pick up the backpack because it could also be a problem if the police or some maintenance workers found it. I knew I wasn't that great of an actress as far as playing the role of a girl with memory loss. My only hope was that since the other kids didn't remember anything either, I didn't look too suspicious.

"Are you doing all right, honey?" Mom asked. "Did you remember something?" She'd obviously observed the grim expression on my face.

I looked over at her, surprised. I had been so lost in my own thoughts, I kind of forgot she was there. "I don't have my car keys," I said. "Did you bring the spare?"

"Honey, we're not picking your car up now," she told me. "I'll figure something out to get it later, but right now we're taking you home."

I really, really wanted to go home. The idea of being snug in our house where we were safe from the undead held a lot of appeal for me. I could still see Jessie's grandfather very vividly in my head, his weird skin making him look both young and old. So much sun exposure over the decades seemed to have somehow made him able to withstand it much longer than Jessie. I could see the scar slashing across his face. The hatred he felt toward me radiating off of him. And those horrible gray eyes. I knew those eyes would haunt my sleep for the rest of my life.

It was a hard thing to reconcile in my head. I loved Jessie so deeply, and when I looked into his eyes I felt pure happiness. But they were the same as his grandfather's eyes. They were the same unfathomable gray. They were the eyes of a vampire.

How could I keep on going, loving Jessie the way I did but constantly under attack from the undead world? I knew deep in my heart that Jessie had been right the first time he had tried to end our relationship. He'd done it to try to protect me. He'd done it because he loved me. I wished I had been smart enough to know that, but I'd let my emotions overrule my head. I'd put myself in danger, my mother in danger, and everyone I'd ever met in danger because I was in love with a vampire.

I hung my head, completely ashamed of how selfish love had made me.

By the time we finally got home, it was pushing nine o'clock. I was exhausted, and every bit of my body hurt. Even the roots of my hair ached a little. "I'm going to bed," I told my mom as I started shuffling for the stairs.

Mom hurried over to my side and put her arms around me. "I'm not going to squeeze you because I know you're in pain, but I just have to hug you for a moment to know that you're here and that you're all right." She sniffed, sounding a bit tearful. "I was so scared when the police called."

"I'm sorry," I told her, hugging back, feeling a guilt so heavy that it was literally weighing down on my chest. "I really wish I knew what happened."

"Maybe you'll be able to remember something after you get some rest," she suggested.

“I hope so,” I said as she released me and I headed for the stairs. “I really hope so.” If I was being honest, what I really wanted to do was forget.

Before I met Jessie, I didn’t know about love, but the world wasn’t that scary of a place. Sure I had to watch out for random perverts and had to keep an eye on a friend if she passed out at a party, but I had never been truly terrified. Since meeting him, I had been constantly pursued by the undead, who were determined to end my life in the most painful ways imaginable. For how good and loving and loyal Jessie was, a lot of other vampires were seriously demented. They didn’t care about mortals. They didn’t think of us as equals. Jessie had told me that many times when a mortal is turned into a vampire it changes who they are. They become twisted and distorted to the point that who they are as the undead doesn’t even resemble who they were when alive.

I shed my clothes, just letting them fall on the floor. I’d bag them up and throw them out in the morning. I was too tired to even take a shower. I started to put on my pajamas but then just sagged on the bed cradling my head in my hands. I didn’t know how to fix my life. I didn’t know how to love Jessie and yet stay safe from the undead world. How could I still keep Jessie in my life and yet live vampire free?

I saw the pendant Grandma Gibson had given me for Christmas sitting on my bedside table. I had to give her credit; she’d almost been right again. And someday she would be right. If things kept going the way they were going, someday a vampire would kill me. I took off my Pools of Light and then snagged the pendant, fastening it around my neck. I knew Jessie would be over soon, but he would just have to deal with me wearing a little silver. After the day I’d just had, I didn’t think he’d begrudge me that.

Gingerly, I pulled on my pajama bottoms and then painfully shimmied into the top. I knew my shoulders were nothing compared to Fred’s, but there was definitely still some discomfort. I couldn’t imagine what he must have gone through fighting the vampire while in excruciating pain. Still, he was alive. They were all alive, so that was good. It was just poor Mervin who was probably dead. At least that death couldn’t really be laid at my feet. Jessie’s grandfather would have come to Tiburon no matter what. And he was always going to eat with an appetite that showed no mercy. The

town was lucky that Fred and Liz and Don were still alive. I was lucky to be alive.

I inched my robe up over my shoulders. I wondered how late Jessie would be. I assumed he had to report in to the Bishops about his grandfather. There would probably be another investigation. That would not be good. I was pretty positive that the Bishops would not look positively upon a repeat offender. Jessie had developed a bad habit of prioritizing my life over that of fellow vampires. On the other hand, Mr. Vanderlind was acting pretty out of control. Vampires weren't allowed to just snatch people off the streets anymore. Not if they didn't want to get locked in a coffin for a few centuries. I sighed, feeling completely drained. I really didn't know what was going to happen.

I was tired. And I was miserable. I wanted to just lie down and shut my eyes. I had some pain pills from the hospital. The ones they had given me before I'd left had worn off. I really wanted to take a few more and then just sleep. I wished Jessie could simply tell me when the hell he was going to show up.

And then a delightful thought occurred to me. He could just tell me. We were living in modern times, and Jessie's girlfriend had just rather thoughtfully given him a smartphone. My plan was briefly interrupted as I thought about my cell phone tucked safely inside my bag somewhere in the bowels of the Tiburon sewer system, but then I remembered that I could just as easily use our land line to call his cell.

We had two phones for our land line. One was in the kitchen, and the other was on a small table in the upstairs hallway. Mom used to have it in her room until I became a teenager. Then she figured that I would probably want more access. That was kind of her, but she was thinking with a brain that was reliant on old technology. She wasn't thinking that modern teens were usually always within hands reach of a phone.

I peeked out into the hallway. I could hear my mom watching television downstairs. I hurried down the hall, snatched up the cordless phone from its cradle, and then dashed back into my room. I pushed the buttons for Jessie's number. I could never remember the formula for a quadratic equation to save my life, but I had memorized the seven digits to Jessie's cell phone almost instantly.



I wandered around my bedroom, waiting as the phone rang. But it didn't surprise me when he didn't pick up. I listened to his honeyed voice asking me personally to leave a message.

"Hi, Jessie, it's me," I started, suddenly feeling embarrassed for no good reason. Just then, there was a tapping at my window. I peeked out through the curtain to see Jessie with his long coat swirling about him, striding away from the glass to the edge of the roof. I continued my message by saying, "Okay, I was going to ask you when you thought you were going to drop by, but you're here now, so never mind." Then I quickly added, "I love you," which was kind of silly seeing that I was just about to be in his arms.

I hung up the phone, tossing it onto my bed. Throwing back the curtains and opening the window, I called out to him in a quiet voice, "Jessie." He was sitting on the edge of the roof with his legs dangling over the side, looking out at the night. "Are you coming in?" I asked softly.

He looked down at his hands and shook his head.

"Okay, I'm coming out," I told him. "I just need to bundle up a little."

Shutting the window so all of the warm air didn't escape from the house, I looked around for something to wear. I didn't know why Jessie wanted to sit on the roof, but I didn't see any reason why I should have to freeze in the process of him explaining. Was the loss of his grandfather bothering him? Or maybe he knew that another vampire death would bring more trouble from the Bishops. In a weird way, I didn't want to know. The last several hours had been so stressful that I didn't feel I could handle any additional bad news. Still, I was eager to be with him, even if it was on our porch roof in late December.

I pulled a pair of sweatpants over my pajama bottoms. I already had on some thick socks, but also stuck my feet into my sheep's wool slippers. I grabbed a sweater and wrapped it around my neck like a scarf. That would have to do until I could lure Jessie back into the house. My shoulders were in no mood for me to try to pull anything over my head.

I expected Jessie to get up when I opened the window again, as I was hooking one leg over the sill. He rustled a little, glancing over his shoulder in my direction, but made no move to assist me or come any closer. *Great*, I thought. *Is he going to try to break up with me again?* I had to admit I was

freaked about staking another vampire and about the undead lifestyle in general, but I never for one minute doubted wanting to be with Jessie Vanderlind. I knew with every fiber of my being that he was the love of my life.

“Jessie,” I said as I came up next to him on the roof. “Are you okay?”

He turned his head away.

“Jessie,” I said again, reaching out to put my hand on his shoulder. “I know things are bad right now, but as long as we’re together, then I’m sure everything will be all right.”

He sprang to his feet, crushing me in his arms, his eyes two burning embers. “That’s where you’re wrong,” he hissed. “Nothing is going to be right ever again. Not for you and not for my dear brother.”

I realized after it was too late that it wasn’t Jessie sitting on my porch roof. It was his brother, Daniel. The roof fell away from my feet as he launched us into the air, one of my slippers tumbling to the ground.

## **Chapter 35**

I started to scream, but then Daniel slapped me hard across the mouth. “Scream again and I’ll rip your pretty face off,” he warned.

“What are you doing?” I demanded, fighting down the hysteria I felt building inside of me.

“I’m doing what I always do,” he informed me. “Cleaning up after my brother. Protecting the family name.”

“How is kidnapping me protecting your family name?” I wanted to know.

“When you have an infestation of termites, you poison them,” he said in a matter-of-fact voice. “When a mortal manages to sink her claws deep into your brother’s heart, what do you think you do?”

I stared at him, opened mouthed. Everything suddenly made sense. The creature in the woods that always filled my dreams wasn’t Jessie. It was Daniel. “You killed Colette,” I finally managed to say.

“Of course, I killed her,” he said, not even trying to deny it. “Wasn’t that obvious? I couldn’t believe that Jessie never suspected me. You’d think I’d be the first person he’d accuse.”

“But why?” I asked, trying not to draw attention to myself as I kicked off my other slipper. It was freezing out, especially up high in the air, but I wanted Jessie to have some idea the direction we were headed.

“Didn’t I just explain myself to you with the termites?” he snapped. “I didn’t want a damn mortal in the family. It’s so humiliating. Most vampires would just take a girl as a companion. But not Jessie. He has to go and offer to conjoin with the wretched creature. Have you ever heard of anything so absurd?”

I assumed his question was rhetorical, so I didn’t answer him. I was too busy scrambling around inside my brain trying to think of what else of mine I could drop to give Jessie a scent trail.

“I thought telling the Bishops about Viktor would have been enough, but no. They ruled in your favor. They even awarded you the honor of being turned into a creature of the night, but you somehow managed to avoid it.”

I tried to distract Daniel while I rubbed one foot against my other leg, trying to scrape off my sock. “So you’re the one that betrayed us to the Bishops. You’re the one that pushed for the inquisition.” I gave him a disdainful look. “You tattled?”

“I was trying to get rid of you in an honorable way,” he informed me.

“By tattling,” I repeated.

His temper began to rise. “I did not tattle. I ...” He paused and looked down as my left sock fell to the earth. “What the hell are you doing?” he demanded.

“Nothing,” I insisted.

“It doesn’t matter,” he informed me. “We’re almost there.”

“Where?” I asked, trying to crane my neck around. We were flying above a bunch of trees.

“I thought it might be nice for continuity’s sake to suck you dry at the same place that I killed Colette. Doesn’t that sound like fun?”

Daniel had definitely lost it if he thought anything about what he’d just described sounded like fun. “Doesn’t it bother you to murder people?” I fired back at him.

“Not in the least,” he said. “Sometimes I wonder if I’ll ever start to feel guilty, but I keep eating, and so far I never have.”

“So you ...” I tried to process what he’d just told me. “So you’ve killed more people than Colette? Aren’t you worried about people coming after you? Your family? Your mom?”

Daniel laughed. A high-pitched, delighted laugh of a small boy who believes he has gotten away with something. “There is so much more to the vampire world than you will ever know.”

We started landing. I saw the tops of trees appearing before me. I shut my eyes for a moment and tried to think. I had no weapon. We were entering a small clearing in the woods, so I could try to grab a tree branch or something. But given the lightning-fast speed of a vampire, that would involve me having a very good head start or quite a bit of luck. I had to stall Daniel as long as I could and just pray that Jessie figured out what had happened to me.

“How many people have you killed?” I asked, hoping he was in a mood to brag about his misdeeds before ending my life.

Daniel gave me a look of disdain. “I haven’t kept a list.”

As he set my feet on the ground, a thought occurred to me. “Did you kill Mervin?”

“That old taxi driver?” he asked. “No. That was Grandfather. He was used to killing with impunity.” Daniel released me in a very nonchalant way, confident that he could knock me to the ground before I could even run two steps. “If I don’t go to the hunting fields, I like to be more subtle when choosing my meal.”

“The hunting fields?” I asked, trying to appear casual as I reached under the sweater I had wrapped around my neck to grasp the silver pendant that used to belong to Colette Gibson.

“A place I’d love to take you,” he said with an evil smile, his gray eyes glittering with malice. “It would be fun to prolong this little encounter, but I’m afraid dear brother would come charging to the rescue and do his best to ruin everything.”

“So you’re doing this just to be spiteful to your brother?” I asked, filling my voice with incredulity.

“You might say that,” he said, grabbing me by the arm and jerking me forward so that we were looking eye to eye. “I very much enjoyed killing you once. Imagine my surprise when you showed up again. This time, it’ll be even better. I do so relish watching Jessie’s heart break. He takes such pleasure in his own grief.”

I knew what I had to do. I had to yank on the pendant so hard that the clasp would break. Then I would slam the silver into Daniel’s eye.

The vampire screamed in pain, releasing me to rid himself of the metal that was sizzling into his skin. Allowing me the few seconds I needed to turn and run.

It felt like I was running through water. My legs were pumping and my arms clawing at the air, but I wasn’t moving very fast. Not in comparison to the speed of a vampire.

“Oh, good,” I heard Daniel call. He must have already rid himself of the silver. “I love it when they run.”

I knew it was winter; I knew there was snow on the ground; but I didn’t see any snow; I didn’t feel any cold, at least not the cold of late December.

Things were missing. I knew I had dropped something, but I couldn't think of what. Something I was carrying? I told myself it didn't matter. I had to keep running. I had to try to elude Daniel until Jessie could find me. I had to try to hide from the beast.

The moon hung high in the sky, shimmering and pale like a drop of water beading on a window pane. I hadn't realized it was a full moon. I'd lost a shoe somewhere as I ran, so I limped along with just one. My lungs were burning as I gasped for breath. My hat was gone, and so was my luggage.

Where was Jessie? Where was my love? My foot caught on a tree root and I fell, barely able to keep a shriek from escaping my lips. My ankle throbbed and I couldn't catch my breath, so I crawled over to where a tree had fallen to shield my body.

My brain felt fuzzy. It was all real. It was all very real. But also like a dream. Like a memory I desperately wanted to forget. My neck burned, and I wondered if I'd scratched it against the branch of a tree as I ran.

A chill began to creep through my body. I tried to wrap my dress around my legs but found I couldn't move my hands. I thought about Mama and Papa. I wished I'd never left them. I wished I was still cozy and warm in my bed with Lily breathing softly in the bed next to me. I wished I could tell Jessie goodbye.

I was having trouble focusing. The burning in my neck had spread down my right arm, and I was beginning to feel it in my chest, shooting down my spine.

I wasn't lying on the ground. I was upright, and snow blew around my ankles. I couldn't move. I was locked in an iron grip. I had Colette's silver pendant in my hand. I could still kind of see it out of the corner of my eye, but Daniel was clenching my wrist.

I hadn't been fast enough. Daniel had sensed my feeble plan to escape. The beast had sunk his teeth into my flesh. He was draining me. The silver pendant slipped through my hand and dropped to the ground.

Every vein in my body throbbed with each gulp Daniel took from the punctures he had made in my neck. I had been so stupid. I would love Jessie

to my last breath, but I had been so very stupid. My whole body was on fire. I knew without a doubt that I wouldn't last much longer. I was going to die.





## Chapter 36

I heard a sound like a flag flapping in a strong wind. Daniel must have heard it too because he looked up from his feast, my blood dripping down his chin.

“Jessie,” he said, immediately releasing me and letting me slump to the ground. “You’re too late again, I’m afraid. Your little mortal is almost dead.”

Just knowing Jessie was there made my failing heart pump a little stronger. I could just make him out from where I lay. He was staring at his brother with a look of complete horror. A word formed on his lips. “Why?”

“Why?” Daniel exclaimed as if he couldn’t believe his ears. “Why?” he repeated. “I did it for the honor of vampires everywhere. I did it to save the family name. I did it for what is right and true and honorable.”

“You’re insane,” Jessie told him.

Daniel laughed. “I might very well be. But it’s the right kind of madness. The noble kind of insanity.”

Then Jessie came at Daniel so quickly I couldn’t even see it, there was just a blur. He sent his brother flying through the air and smashing into a tree. He crashed to the ground but was instantly on his feet again. “Is that all you’ve got?” Daniel wanted to know. “I killed the love of your life twice, and all you can do is give me a little shove?”

“At least I know what it is to love,” Jessie said before lunging at his brother again.

Daniel had been concealing a branch behind his back. He must have somehow grabbed it when he fell. He tried to stab Jessie with it, but thankfully Jessie managed to twist his body out of the way just in time. Daniel was off balance after his lunge, and he staggered a little, giving Jessie the opportunity he needed to kick the branch out of Daniel’s hands.

I flinched as the broken limb flew past my head. It landed a few feet away from me. I wanted to leap up and grab it and help in the fight, but my

arms and legs felt so heavy. I found it difficult to even turn my head.

I knew I was dying. I had lost too much blood to live. But Daniel couldn't win. I had to help. I had to find a way to at least save Jessie. Inch by inch, I dragged myself over to the broken branch as the two brothers fought and crashed through the woods around me. They were causing so much destruction to the trees, I couldn't understand how they both weren't already dead. It must have been their vampire reflexes.

The wood was in my hand. I could see it there, if I couldn't exactly feel it. I felt so disjointed from myself. It was truly frightening. My efforts had exhausted me, and I closed my eyes to rest a bit while Jessie and his brother fought all around me.

They always say that when you're dying, your life flashes in front of your eyes. I knew I must have been near death because I could remember everything. I could remember my whole life. Going barefoot on sweet summer days. Finding a silver dime while planting a pine tree in the side yard. The bright smell of freshly cut lumber. Blossom and me racing down the sidewalk on our bikes to try to catch the ice cream man.

I remembered we were all out at Grandma's farm when they announced the end of prohibition. The adults got all excited and Grandma broke out a bottle of her "medicinal" wine from the root cellar.

I remembered when Mom found out that Dad was cheating on her with a girl who was almost still a teenager. And I remembered that girl calling my mom a bitch so I chucked a cup of butterscotch pudding at her head. That memory made me smile.

I remembered everything so clearly, and it made me both happy and sad. I didn't want my life to be over. But it made me understand things that had been bothering me ever since I could remember. Because it wasn't just my life I was remembering. I was remembering everything from my previous life, too.

I finally knew why I instantly felt about Jessie the way that I did. I finally understood the connection. When I first saw Jessie, it was like I had a metal string running through my body and someone had plucked it. The string had never stopped vibrating ever since that very first moment I laid eyes on him. And I finally understood that feeling. I finally realized the

cause of all my crazy dreams and nightmares. They were all messages from my past life. They were memories from who I used to be.

I was startled out of my reverie by a loud noise not far from my head. Jessie must have hurled his brother against another tree because there was the sound of wood cracking and then Daniel came crashing to the ground. “You can’t win, Jessie,” the vampire snarled as he leapt to his feet. “The longer we fight, the closer your darling draws toward death. And even if you do manage to stake me, mother would never forgive you.”

“After your dealings with Grandfather, I think our mother has figured out that you’re a mad dog that needs to be put down,” Jessie told him, taking a swing but missing.

“Our grandfather was a visionary,” Daniel all but shouted. “He knew how to truly be a vampire. He understood how things should be. No more cowering in the shadows. No more keeping our powers secret from the world.”

I wanted to hear more, but trying to listen to them made me tired. My arms were dead weights, and I couldn’t feel anything below the middle of my back. I knew that couldn’t be a good sign. My great grandmother had been right. I was never going to see her again. With all her near misses in fortune telling, she’d finally seen the future clearly.

An idea occurred to me. If Grandma Gibson did have some kind of supernatural gift, maybe I could reach out to her. Maybe if I concentrated, I could let her know how I died. I knew it wouldn’t make my disappearance and presumed death any easier, but at least she would have some idea of what happened.

I closed my eyes and tried to concentrate. “Grandma,” I shouted in my head. “Grandma Gibson. It’s me, Aurora. This is me. I’m here in the woods, and I’m dying.” I didn’t know if there was any chance she was picking up on my thoughts, but I kept going anyway. “You were right. I couldn’t stay away from the vampires, and now I’m dying. I’m never going to see you again.” I felt hot tears welling in my eyes. “It wasn’t Jessie, though, who killed me. And it wasn’t Jessie that killed Colette. It was his brother, Daniel. He’s the one that caused you so much suffering. He’s the one that killed us.” The tears started rolling down my cheeks, and I couldn’t even lift my hand

to brush them away. "I love you, Grandma Gibson. I'm sorry I couldn't listen. I just loved Jessie too much. Please tell Mom that I love her, too, and that I wanted to say goodbye."

I opened my eyes again. At first, I thought the woods had become foggy, but then I realized it was just the world starting to fade. Daniel and Jessie were still fighting. I wondered how much time had passed. And how much time did I have left?

Something deeper in the woods caught my eye. There was a strange glow. I tried to focus, but my eyes were growing quite bleary. It was moving. I couldn't quite make it out. A person with a lantern, maybe. A vampire wouldn't need a light. I wanted to call out to them, to warn them to stay away.

A moment later, I saw a glowing figure standing between the trees. It moved, and I was able to see a little better. It was a woman. I could tell that much, but otherwise I couldn't quite make her out. It was hard to discern if she was young or old. But she was definitely surrounded by an unearthly glow. "Aurora," I heard her call. "You have to try."

"Grandma Gibson?" I whispered. Had she somehow heard me?

"You have to hold on," the woman told me. "You have to try."

"Colette?" I asked, confused.

"Please, Aurora. If you can't do it for yourself, then do it for him. You have to try," she said. Either she was fading, or my vision was getting worse. "Please try."

"I will," I whispered. "I promise."

My left hand felt a little warmer. I hadn't been able to feel it at all just a moment earlier, and now there was some sensation. I shifted my eyes and saw that just inches away from my hand was the silver pendant Grandma Gibson had given me. It was glowing, just like the woman in the woods. And it was there, within my grasp.

I reached for it; my hand was clumsy and awkward, but I was still able to pick up the pendant. I could feel the silver in my hand.

Jessie was knocked to the ground a few feet away from me. I parted my lips and breathed out, "Jessie," hoping he could hear me. I thought he glanced in my direction, and I moved my hand, trying to draw his attention to what I was tenuously clutching.

The little clearing where we were had been devastated by their combat. Both brothers looked tattered. It was true that they started to heal as soon as they were struck, but that did nothing for their clothes. Jessie's coat had been torn from his back. His shirt was in shreds. Daniel had fared no better. His face was smeared with dirt as if Jessie had literally tried to pound him into the ground.

"You can't fight me forever," Daniel said, his breath ragged. "The longer you waste, the closer your little pet draws toward death."

"I'm going to kill you," Jessie snarled, rage seething off of him. He punched his brother in the chin and sent him sprawling.

Daniel was instantly on his feet. He released a loud laugh, but it didn't sound very natural. Even in my weakened state, I could tell that it was filled with bravado. "You might as well say goodbye to your little pet," he said. "You're not going to kill me. You're too soft. You don't have the guts." He took a wide swing, and much to my surprise, the blow connected, sending Jessie tumbling over to my side.

Jessie snatched the pendant out of my hand, his face only reacting faintly to the searing pain it must have caused him to have silver in his palm. He got to his feet and turned to face his brother. "You're right about one thing, Daniel. Aurora is dying, and I need to tend to her." He lowered his fists. "But this isn't over, Daniel."

His brother gave a disdainful laugh, also lowering his guard. "Typical," he said. "I will never understand why you prioritize this human over your own kind."

"Because I love her," Jessie shouted, simultaneously thrusting his open palm toward Daniel's face.

Daniel was not expecting the blow, and he definitely wasn't expecting to be burned with silver. He let out a yelp of pain and clawed at his cheek as the silver seared his skin. Jessie grabbed him by the shoulders and flung him at a broken limb jutting out from a tree. Daniel had been completely

distracted by the silver. He tried to contort his body to avoid the tree, but it was too late. The wood pierced his flesh, plunging deep into his chest.

Daniel looked down, appearing more surprised than in pain, confused about the piece of tree protruding from his torso. “You can’t,” he exclaimed. “What will Mother say?” A look of fear crossed his face as the wood started to work for whatever reason wood ended the existence of the undead.

I closed my eyes and turned my face away when Daniel started screaming. I didn’t need to see another vampire wither and disintegrate from the stake. It was enough just to know that Colette’s killer was dead. My killer was dead.

“Aurora?”

I had heard Jessie say my name, but I didn’t open my eyes. I was so tired. So very, very tired.

“Aurora,” he said again, his voice filled with despair as he gathered me up in his arms.

I forced open my eyes. “Jessie,” I said, my voice sounding feeble, even to my own ears. “I remember everything.”

“I know,” he said. “And I’m so sorry.”

“No,” I whispered softly. “I mean I remember my life.” Jessie gave me a confused look, his beautiful gray eyes brimming with pain. I explained with, “I remember the day you proposed. I remember the suit that you wore. You had a red flower in your lapel.” I took in a long, shuddering breath. “I remember the first time you kissed me. It was under the apple tree in my parents’ backyard.”

Jessie’s eyes went wide with wonder. “Colette?” he asked. “You’re saying you’re Colette?”

“No,” I told him. “Not now. I’m Aurora. But I remember everything. I remember her whole life. I’m Aurora now, but I know I was Colette once, too.”

“Jessie,” I heard a woman’s voice call. “What’s going on here? Where’s your brother?”

“Leave us alone!” Jessie shouted, cradling me in his arms. “Daniel’s dead!”

“What?” Mrs. Vanderlind exclaimed, hurrying forward. “What happened?”

“He killed Colette,” Jessie growled, clutching me to his chest, “and now he’s killed Aurora.”

“Aurora’s dead?” Mrs. Vanderlind asked, stepping even closer, her dark hair hanging loose, framing her beautiful face.

“She’s dying,” was Jessie’s reply, his voice ragged.

Mrs. Vanderlind frowned. “We have to do something. We have to take her to a hospital.”

“No,” I protested, my voice only coming out as a faint rasp. “Too many questions. They would ask too many questions.” I shivered, unable to feel anything beyond halfway down my chest. “And besides, it’s too late now.”

My peripheral vision began to narrow. Mrs. Vanderlind faded from my view. The only thing I was still able to see was Jessie’s beautiful face. “Please tell my mom,” I said, my breath catching in my lungs. “Please tell her so she doesn’t spend the rest of her life wondering.”

“I will, my darling,” Jessie assured me, clutching me to him. “I am so sorry. Aurora, I’m just so sorry.”

“No,” I told him. “It’s all right.” The world was getting smaller and smaller. I could barely see Jessie at all anymore. The only thing left that I could make out was his beautiful gray eyes. “It’s just ...”

“What is it my dear, sweet Aurora?” he asked.

I parted my lips and focused very hard on making them speak. “I’m going to miss you.”

“I’ll wait for you,” Jessie cried, tears rolling down his face. “No matter how long it takes, I’ll wait for you. Just promise you’ll come back to me.”

I wanted to tell him I would try. I wanted to tell him that I loved him and that, more than anything in the world, I wanted him to be happy. But



my words were gone. My vision was fading. My breath was frozen in my chest.

“This is my curse,” Jessie sobbed. “This is my fate. To find true love and then always lose her.”

The world became dark. My vision went black. All I could see was a small pinhole of light at the end of what looked like a very long tunnel.

The last thing I felt was one of Jessie’s tears splashing on my cheek. The last thing I heard was him saying, “Goodbye, my darling. Sleep well.”



## Epilogue

I was screaming. I couldn't remember when I'd started screaming, and I didn't feel like I could ever stop. It felt like every cell in my body had exploded.

"Aurora. Drink this." A voice penetrated through my shrieks of pain. A glass was pressed against my lips. I struggled against it, but the person was insistent, holding the back of my neck and forcing the glass to my mouth. "Drink! It'll help."

I realized that the voice belonged to Jessie. I didn't understand what was going on, but I knew he was trying to help, so I took a sip. As the liquid washed over my tongue, it was like water quenching a fire. The searing pain that had been shooting through my body diminished. I took another large gulp, and the pain faded even more. I wrapped both hands around the glass and began sucking the contents down. It was ambrosia. It was the most delicious thing that I'd ever tasted.

"Easy, easy," Jessie said, trying to coax the glass from my hands so I would drink a little slower.

"No," I told him. "I need it." It tasted so good, I felt like I needed the sweet elixir he was giving me in order to live. "What is it?"

He was quiet for a moment and then said, "It's blood."

"What?" I sputtered, swallowing a gulp down the wrong pipe and coughing hard. "What did you say?"

"It's blood," he repeated, applying the glass to my lips again.

I wanted to spit it out. My brain was repulsed, but my body craved more. "How can I ...?" I scanned my memory. I remembered Daniel grabbing me. I remembered the pain of him draining me. And I remembered the battle in the woods.

For the first time, I was able to take in our surroundings. I was lying on a large bed with crisp, clean sheets. Jessie was sitting on a chair next to me. We were in a vast bedroom that was sumptuously furnished. I had to

assume we were in the castle. “What happened?” I wanted to know. “How am I even alive?”

He hung his head, unable to speak.

“Jessie?” I asked, reaching out to him. I needed his reassurance.

“It was my mother,” he said, taking my hand but not meeting my eye. “Daniel had drained so much of you that after you died she ...” His words faded.

“After I died?” I asked, feeling frightened. But that couldn’t be. I was alive. I was there in the room with him. It didn’t make sense.

I tried to think. I remembered being in the woods with Jessie holding me. I remembered him saying goodbye. And then the world grew very black. “Does that mean ...?” I wasn’t even sure what I wanted to ask.

Jessie nodded, still looking down. “You’re one of us now,” he said quietly.

I couldn’t take it in. Did he mean I was a vampire? That was the only explanation I could think of for how I was still alive and why a glass full of blood tasted like nectar. I frowned, not sure what to think. How could I be a vampire?

Before I could ask another question, Jessie blurted, “Aurora, I’m so sorry.” He took my other hand and pressed them both to his face, covering his eyes. “I can’t believe I let this happen to you.”

“It’s okay,” I said automatically. I wasn’t in pain anymore. I felt a lot better. The blood had cured me. I had gone from agony to feeling vital and strong. “Everything is going to be all right.” But I immediately began to worry. If I was a vampire, what was I going to tell my mom?

“What are you thinking about?” he asked, pulling my hands away from his face, his voice tentative, his eyes still not meeting mine.

“My mom,” I admitted. “I don’t know what I’m going to tell her about all of this. I don’t want her to be upset.”

Jessie lifted his eyes, looking into my face. “Oh, thank God,” he said, visibly relieved. Shifting over to the bed, he wrapped me in his arms, pressing his face into my hair. “Thank God,” he said again.

“What?” I was confused.

He pulled away slightly so we could talk. “If you’re worried about your mother then becoming a vampire hasn’t changed you. Not the real you,” Jessie said. “I’m sure I told you that ... Sometimes when a person is transformed ...” He paused. “Oh, never mind about that now. It’s enough to know that you’re still Aurora. You’re the same girl to whom I gave my heart.”

“Jessie,” I whispered, moving closer again, desperately wanting to be near him.

“Aurora,” he said, pressing his lips against mine. “I love you.”

My body thrilled; there was still that same electricity between us. That hadn’t changed. After a moment’s hesitation, our kiss deepened.

The knowledge that I was a vampire frightened me. But I was also grateful. It was the only way. I knew that every time I was reborn, I would fall in love with Jessie all over again. But mortals are too fragile to survive in the vampire world. It was my destiny to become a vampire. It was my fate. Now Jessie and I could be together forever.

## The End

Thank you for reading *Fate of the Vampire*, the final book in the Vanderlind Castle series. If you are reading this book on a Kindle device, then when you turn to the last page you will be given the opportunity to express your thoughts on Facebook and Twitter. If you’ve enjoyed the story, would you please take a moment to click that button and let your friends know? I would very much appreciate it.

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